THE TRAIL TO APACAZ

EUGENE CUNNINGHAM

THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS
1800

Class PZ3
Book .C91635
Tr
Copyright No. 2
Copy 2
COPYRIGHT DEPOSIT

THE TRAIL TO APACAZ

THE TRAIL TO APACAZ

By EUGENE CUNNINGHAM

NEW YORK
DODD, MEAD AND COMPANY
1924

Copy 2

PZ3
.C91635
Tr
2
Copy2

Copyright, 1924
By DODD, MEAD AND COMPANY, Inc.

Price $2.00

SEP -4 1924

PRINTED IN U. S. A.

VAIL-BALLOU PRESS, INC.
BINGHAMTON AND NEW YORK

©CLASS00681

TO MY MOTHER

"A Lady of the Old South"

CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
I	Wanted—a Gunman	1
II	At the Mountain Inn	21
III	Apacaz	33
IV	Seething Politics	48
V	Jobs for Two	68
VI	Confidences	84
VII	Eavesdropping—and a Necktie	99
VIII	A Fair Exchange	114
IX	"Come to Carlotta of the Stars"	136
X	Centipedes Have a Thousand Legs	150
XI	Beside the Trail	157
XII	"Heart of Mine!"	169
XIII	Efficient Manhandling	185
XIV	In Which a Call is Paid	196
XV	Maria of the "Tobobas"	209
XVI	Through the Smoke	225
XVII	Gaylord—Strategist	239
XVIII	Pageant Day	257
XIX	"Man Proposes, But——"	272

THE TRAIL TO APACAZ

Chapter I

WANTED—A GUNMAN

THE *shush-shush* of the wide, boulder-studded stream was almost the only sound in that sector of jungle; silence, that was pregnant somehow with sinister potentialities, was like a palpable fog over the wilderness; a hush so deep that a dropping leaf threatened to set echoes reverberating. In the shallows by the southern—the Tierra Rican—bank a snowy heron stood solemnly a-fishing; a monkey-mother cuddled a pinky little one in a low tree at the water's edge.

Then the leafy wall along the Tierra Rican shore was agitated in a certain spot, the movement so soundless that neither heron nor monkey heard. A wise, alert white mule-face emerged from the greenery, then the accompanying body seemed to *pour* noiselessly after the head. Trim hoofs slid down the bank, entered the water, still

without sound. Delicately Paloma, the magnificent white *mula,* tested each foot of the stream-floor, as a blind man probes his way. She gained midstream, passed it with the current curling on her breast, and reached the northern bank.

Her rider lay like an Indian along her side, sheltered so from any eyes downstream. The hand hooked around saddlehorn held a long-barrelled, ivory-handled "Frontier" Colt; the left hand, curving beneath the thick neck, was similarly armed.

Paloma halted momentarily before the steeper bank that was the southern border of the Republic of Flores. She reared daintily, then dropped her forehoofs upon it, and with a surge of great haunch-muscles was up—and the only sound was the softest of thuds, a ghostly rustling as she entered the jungle.

Stephen Lawhorn—"*El Diablo*" the Central Americans named him—straightened in the big Texan swell-fork and reholstered his revolvers. Turning toward the shore he had just quitted so cautiously, he whistled twice, a shrill, peculiar call.

Instantly, on the Tierra Rican bank, silence became pandemonium. Horses crashed to and

fro in the undergrowth; furious voices shrilled many-jointed Spanish execrations, as a score of outwitted Tierra Rican lancers testified stridently that once more had the *diablo Americano* slipped through their fingers. Rifles exploded; the jungle-wall on the Flores bank was riddled by unaimed bullets.

The soldier of fortune produced a black native cigarette and lit it as he listened. The war-flame was vanished from the green-grey eyes; his stubbled, high-nosed face was merely contented now; the wide, firm-lipped mouth curved upward of corner. He waited, blowing smoke-rings upward into the still air. In a little time the uproar was succeeded by sullen quiet; the lancers dared not invade the foreign soil of Flores, even to lay hands on this their quarry. Then Steve Lawhorn rose stiff-legged in his stirrups and doffing the bullet-pierced grey Stetson, inclined his coppery head in courtly, ironical salute.

"*Adiós, amigos míos!*" he called clearly. "Perhaps I shall come again, some day, to play with you the game of war. But for this time—*adiós!*"

Without waiting for further demonstration from his pursuers, who had followed grimly dur-

ing two days, then slipped ahead to set this ambush he had detected and avoided, Steve spurred Paloma forward, his big shoulders shaking as he rode. But presently his lean face turned grave as he remembered the stricken field, two days' ride behind him, where lay Don Federico Pelaya, would-be ruler of Tierra Rica, staring upward with sightless eyes.

For four months Pelaya and Steve, his chief of staff, had pitted meagre forces against the Federals of President Sellama. Then Sellama's swarming troops had overwhelmed the revolutionary camp; all was over.

So the Rio Lagarta marked another frontier crossed in Steve Lawhorn's life. He had passed a good many such—boundaries of one adventure or another—in his six years of enforced wandering south of the Texan border. At first their passing had affected him. When, as a dare-devil centaur of twenty-one, he had snapped contemptuous fingers in the very whiskers of Death, he had usually looked back. Not so often did he do that now.

Paloma broke through the tangled undergrowth, and in the trail struck into the effortless single-foot gait that barely swayed Steve in the saddle,

yet unwound the miles behind her like ribbon from a spool. Steve grinned down at her. There had been a time when, like most born Texans, he would have scorned a mule as saddle-animal. With the recollection his mind harked back to other days, other scenes.

He remembered boyhood happenings on the *Circle Diamond;* the Morgan-strain horses which had been his father's pride, although the first stallion and mares had been brought from the Tennessee plantation of Steve's mother's people, because the scrubby saddle-stock of the Texan range offended her horsewoman's eye. Steve's lips curved tenderly as his mother's picture, a dainty miniature, rose before his inner eye—slim, graceful, lovely; a lady of the Old South; a Tennessee MacCullough, daughter of that distinguished Confederate brigadier and post-bellum governor of his State, Rob Roy MacCullough, whose name was even yet a magic word in his own country.

How she had changed the big Texan who had brought her West, worshipping her as one of the lesser gods! The broad ranch-acres had become a showplace under her refining direction; the rambling stone ranch-house had become a home.

If she had lived—— Steve stared unseeingly at the green trail-walls ahead, remembering all too vividly that black day when he was nine, when all the light seemed to go out of the world with the quiet procession that halted beneath the live-oaks on a knoll overlooking the house.

It had been her dying command that Steve should go to college. So in the boy's seventeenth year his father—changed with his wife's death from "Big Jay," to "Silent Jay" Lawhorn—had shipped him east to Culver as emotionlessly as if Steve had been a blazed-face steer ready for the stockyards.

Flashes from four years of brain and body-building at the big military academy came back to Steve as he rode swiftly upward through dense jungle. He wondered curiously if any of his classmates had known such grim experiences as those which had transformed him so abruptly from youth to man.

For graduation-day had marked the end of normal existence for him. The mental pictures unrolled before his inner eye like scenes watched from a moving train. He could see himself reading the telegram thrust into his hands but a moment after he had received his diploma; reading

with blurring eyes of his father's murder by unknown assassins. He had rushed toward Texas, dazed, heartsick.

Morg Connor, son of Jay Lawhorn's old foreman—then holding his father's lifelong post as foreman of the *Circle Diamond*—had met Steve at the little sun-bleached station of Saylor City, to give him the meagre details. Steve remembered how he had belted on his father's Colts—found fouled and empty, gripped in the big, dead hands—and with the faithful Morg had ridden day after weary day in fruitless search of the clue that would lead him surely to the smiling, soft-voiced Mexican, Guerra, his father's bitter enemy, owner of the adjoining ranch and political boss of Saylor County.

Still the pictures came—the adobe saloon and store in Saylor City; the three sneering men before the rough bar; the slurring remark about his dead father as Steve stood buying cartridges; his turn upon them; the bullets from behind that grazed his shoulder; his own guns flipping from the holsters; the lightning bullet that killed "Three Finger Jack" Taylor in the doorway.

Now, as Paloma's tireless hoofs bore him steadily to northward, through tangled depths of

brown-green scrub-jungle, overtopped by emerald matapalas and feathery coco-palms, broodingly Steve reconstructed the past, as he had done times without number while riding Wanderers' Trail.

He could hear Ben Allison's earnest advice; could see the old ranchman's grizzled face, its gravity no whit lessened by tobacco-swollen cheek.

"Yeh gotta skip for Mexico, Stevie! No other way out. Guerra, he's got Saylor County in his vest-pocket—dam' his black soul to everlastin' hell! Us white men, we can't move—yit! They're a-callin' it murder, 'cause your bullet took Taylor in the back as he whirled to hike. They'll stretch yeh, sure's hell's hot, if yeh stick here. Git an' stay got! I'm tellin' yeh as your dad's best friend. Guerra's offerin' a thousand for yeh, dead or alive."

Thus roughly had he been picked up, like a troublesome puppy; hurled from the life he knew; sentenced to wander interminably with a price on his head. Small wonder that he was grim-faced before his time. Life had held for him no such marvellous value that he shrank from risking it. So, with the lanky, ever-cheerful Morg Connor at

his shoulder, he had been machine-gunner in a Mexican "revolutionary army," then, drifting farther south, alternately ranch-hand and placer-miner, plantation-boss and soldier of fortune.

No man may follow this last trade and be blamed only for his own misdeeds. So gradually Stephen Lawhorn's name had come to spell reckless gunplay, amazing dare-devilry, from end to end of the Six Republics. "*El Diablo*" the natives named him, sometimes crossing themselves with the title; Americans and Europeans of the better class avoided him as a pariah; he was pointed out on the streets of towns to wide-eyed tourists; illustrated supplements of American newspapers carried lurid accounts of his adventuring accompanied by supposed likenesses sketched from imagination.

In a naturally sensitive man this searing notoriety works corresponding hardening, forms a protective callosity of bravado. Always finding ostracism, by bitter experience Steve learned to keep to himself. He went his way defiantly, flaunting the reputation gossip gave him in the faces of any who might look.

From this moody introspection Steve roused himself to relight his cigarette and study the

land's lay ahead. As far as eye might reach to northward, above the jungle-top the horizon was walled in by the tumbled peaks of the Cordilleras, blue-grey with distance, shrouded with lacy mist. The trail grew wider; from the jungle ox-cart ruts turned into it; the hoofs of many horses and mules had pounded the black dirt iron-hard. The trees were thinning. By all the signs a frontier-town should be near. From accounts of other wanderers Steve drew data on this region; La Cruz the town must be.

At last he rode out upon a chalky plain. Barely half a mile to northward a huddle of rude sapling- and adobe-walled huts sprawled like scattered children's blocks helter-skelter upon the dreary prairie. At the village-border he was greeted by the mustered curs of the place, which ringed him around with frantic yapping. At the store—the largest building of the place—a slatternly woman agreed to give him noonday breakfast, and when he had unsaddled Paloma and brought her maize-ears the woman set food upon a table and stood near to watch him eat.

"You have come a—long way, señor?" she inquired, between puffs at her *cigarro*. "From

Tierra Rica, perhaps? The revolution there, how goes it now?''

''I have *heard,*'' replied Steve blandly, sipping his coffee, ''that it is over. But so many lies are told——'' He broke off with a shrug.

She nodded impassively, then the sharp black eyes found his Stetson, hanging from a peg above his head.

''Your sombrero,'' she remarked thoughtfully, ''it is—torn!''

Steve shot a keen glance at her, but the brown face was unreadable.

''When a shod *mula* tramples a hat,'' sighed Steve, ''one must buy a new one. No?''

She sniffed contemptuously at the insinuation, then paddled toward the kitchen. Steve continued to eat, keeping watch alternately upon kitchen and street door. As he finished his coffee a man in faded khaki and leather puttees halted on the veranda outside to stare long at Paloma, even longer at the dangling, swell-forked saddle. He turned to peer inside the store, but a broad straw hat sheltered his upper face, so that Steve got only a vague impression of narrowed eyes that shone curiously pale in contrast to the ma-

hogany-hued skin, of a ropy black moustache that matched the ragged hair straggling from beneath the hat.

Then the man stepped inside, and stood regarding Steve curiously as the latter made his cigarette. After a perceptible pause the stranger came over. Steve observed that he was somewhat under middle height, and paunchy, as if he exercised but little.

"My name's Jones—Simon Jones," the newcomer volunteered. "Where you from?"

Steve nodded, but made no reply. He had never outgrown the born Texan's dislike for personal questions from strangers. Jones pulled out a stool and sat down opposite Steve.

"Guess you *don't* care to advertise," he grinned knowingly. "They come dam' near gettin' you, what?"

Steve merely eyed him steadily. There was silence for a space.

"Well, she's all over in Tierra Rica, Lawhorn!" said Jones suddenly. "Now, now, don't get excited! I know all about it. You're too well known to pass for anybody else. I know the Federals mopped up Pelaya's outfit. I know they didn't get you because you was out scoutin' when

they attacked. *In* fact''—the pale eyes rested steadily upon the blank face opposite—''there ain't—much—about—you—I—*don't*—know!''

Steve's expression betokened entire indifference to the little man's knowledge of his affairs. But while his left hand still held the cigarette movelessly, his right had gripped a gun-butt under the table. The Colt rested upon his lap.

He was faintly puzzled. That Jones should know of his late activities in Tierra Rica—in other parts of the tropics—was not surprising. The career of Stephen Lawhorn, most famous soldier of fortune Central America had known for generations, was widely published. But the fellow's purpose was not clear.

''Well, what d'you figure to do here in Flores? Ruy Gomez, the Dictator, ain't a bit fond o' wanderin' revolutionists.''

''Why, *I'm* a cowpunch'; top-hand at ranchin','' returned Steve, dropping into the cowland-drawl that was at once his birthright and *lingua de guerre.* ''Driftin' nawth to hunt me a job.''

''Just a wanderin' cowpunch', huh?'' sneered Jones. ''I guess! I *hear* that the gov'ment o' Tierra Rica's all-fired anxious to lay hands on a

cowpunch' about your size. Cowpunch' he may be, but *they* call him brains o' Pelaya's revolution. Yeh; they're anxious to get him. Almost as anxious''—now he eyed Steve narrowly, tensely, hesitating perceptibly—"as the State o' Texas is to hang him for murder!"

Steve's leaping emotions were betrayed by no slightest change of expression; no muscle of his well-trained body twitched. But to his dying day Simon Jones never knew how closely he had brushed death. The big Colt-hammer was beneath Steve's thumb; only swift exercise of will kept it from flipping back. It was the first time that anyone had referred in Steve's hearing to that old charge which had sent him across the Rio Grande into Mexico. With mention of that six-year-old indictment panic welled up in Steve; he had to struggle against the impulse to spring up and fly, as if the law's bloodhounds were already snarling at his heels.

But he sat with drooping lids, moveless pose telling nothing of the battle within. Gradually came calmness. He must see how much Jones really knew.

"Never occurred to yuh, I reckon, that yuh *might* be bulldoggin' the wrong steer?"

"Now, what's the use of bluffin'?" scoffed the other. "I know, I tell you! No use your tryin' to kid me; I know, too, that you're wonderin' right now whether to plug me with that baby-cannon you're pointin' under the table. *If* you do, we go out together. I'm pullin' the same frame, only mine's a .45 automatic."

Steve revised his opinion of Jones. Evidently the little man was more efficient than he appeared. Vainly Steve tried to read the expression in the little blue eyes.

"Well!" he challenged metallically. "What's your game?"

"See what you're up against, huh? On one side, a little pressure on Ruy Gomez an' back you go to Tierra Rica an' the firin' squad. On the other hand, if 'twas known that you're in Flores, there'd be Texas extradition papers out in jig-time. Now, I'm willin' to show you the gap in the fence.

"You got the name o' bein' chain-lightnin' on the draw, a square-shooter with the guy that pays you. Also, they say you can keep quiet in more languages than any bird in C. A. So there's maybe a job for you in Flores, workin' for—well, call 'em 'certain powerful interests.' With this

job you'll be protected from the firin' squad in Tierra Rica *an'* the rope in Texas. Also you'll be well paid. See?''

''What's the job?''

''Never mind! She's absolutely in your line. We might say, generally, that you'd stand by to do what you was told—then do it up right!''

The man's uncanny knowledge of him had shaken Steve badly, especially that reference to the old murder-indictment. Vision of his return to Saylor City, to be lynched by Guerra's henchmen, at best to be railroaded to the penitentiary on perjured evidence, sent cold chills playing along his spine. The more recent matter of his revolutioning in Tierra Rica he dismissed; he could wriggle out of that as he had done in several like cases.

''These interests yuh mentioned; it's a gunman they're wantin'?''

''Right! Best they can get. One who'll do his work nice an' smooth, then forget he done it. They say o' you, Lawhorn, that you never break your word. That's why I'm makin' you the offer.''

Steve ignored the compliment. He was wondering just what this mysterious employment

might be. Some private vendetta, where his guns would turn the tide? He had never gone blindly into any service, binding himself to support a cause he might not approve, but in this instance there seemed little choice left him.

"You're headin' for Apacaz? For the capital?" Jones' voice broke in upon his meditations. "Then you needn't give me your answer now. Not but what the safest thing you can do is to agree," he added sinisterly. "But when you get to Apacaz you'll be—communicated with. *After* you've passed your word ever'thing'll be mapped out for you. Now, since you're leavin' right away"—significantly—"I'll tell you about the trails.

"The upper road's shortest—in an airline—but it's so shot to pieces now that it takes longer to cover than the lower trail. So head out the way you come in. Half-mile west o' town you'll find a big matapala tree with a blaze. Turn north on the path by the matapala an' you'll come into the lower road. It'll take you about two days to make San Pedro—Flores' Caribbean seaport—an' another day from the coast up to Apacaz. See?"

Steve nodded. He reholstered the Colt he had

held in his lap and got up. Jones rose also, and patted Steve's shoulder in the patronizing fashion of one who holds firmly the whip-hand.

"Aw, don't look so down in the mouth!" he grinned. "You can't help it that you bumped into a foxy guy that's got your number. As it happens, you fit into my scheme, so, when I heard they had you on the run in Tierra Rica, I just waited here in La Cruz and gathered you in. I'll be waitin' for your 'yes,' too. Don't forget it!"

Steve saddled Paloma, then went inside to buy tobacco and cooked food. When he came outside Jones was gone, so Steve stuffed his purchases into the big saddlebags, swung into the saddle, and rode grimly out of La Cruz. But as he passed the last miserable hut of the village he turned suddenly and saw Jones dodging behind a house.

At the blazed matapala Steve turned Paloma into a narrow trail through thorny scrub. He jogged on, speculating about Jones and the man's employers. Then a cheerful native on a tiger-striped *mula* pulled up sharply and smiled at Steve. He was of the middle class, in clean khakis and snowy Panama hat.

"Hallo, señor!" he cried in broken English. "You are for San Pedro, what?"

"Yes, then to Apacaz," Steve replied.

"But, señor! For Apacaz, why are you go over thees road of ten thousand, thousand devil? Thees *camino* she ees—how you say?—ver' dam' bad like hell! *Sí!* Mooch dust; holes ver' many. Ver' better you go thees way, señor." The man indicated a narrow path behind his little *mula*. "In two miles you are come to *El Camino Alto*—the upper road. Ver' smooth; ver' good."

The man's expression held only the friendly desire to set a stranger aright, but Jones had said that the *upper* trail was impassable. Steve wondered if he had accidentally found the joker; was Jones desirous of delaying his arrival in Apacaz?

"Sure this is the bad trail?" But Steve was already certain that Jones had lied.

"Of a certainment, señor! I myself have but come from San Pedro. Four days of bad, bad ride."

"Thanks!" said Steve. "I'll turn off here. By the way, if, when you reach La Cruz, anyone should ask if you met me on the lower trail, will

you say that you did, forgetting to mention that I turned off here?''

The native winked, smiling broadly.

''Ah-h! I am comprehend ver' good! I will say, 'Of a certainty I have see one ver' beeg *Americano* riding *la mula blanca.* He ees go upon *el camino* for San Pedro when I meet heem!' Ha! Juan Sanchez Ruiz, she ees fool them, señor. Have not the to-worry.''

He waved and rode on, chuckling. Steve, smiling grimly at thought of Jones' artifice miscarrying, turned into the narrow bridlepath and kept Paloma at a steady single-foot until the path joined the upper trail that led directly to Apacaz over the mountains. When darkness overtook him he turned aside to where a little stream was born of a rock-spring and made his camp for the night.

Chapter II

AT THE MOUNTAIN INN

"THIS trail was certainly named by a literal-minded man, Palomita!" grunted Steve, as the white *mula* halted to breathe after an unusually steep ascent. "It's the 'upper trail' without argument."

All morning the road had borne them upward; they were well into the red-black hills now, among great pines and cedars thrusting skyward from the lava-strewn mountain-sides.

As they idled upon this hilltop a stocky Indian packer trotted toward them, under a burden which would have staggered a husky white man in half a hundred yards.

" *'Dias,* señor!" he grunted as he came alongside, then halted to eye curiously the big white man and his splendid mount.

"From whence come you, *amigo?*" inquired Steve, in his accentless Spanish.

"From Apacaz, señor." He grinned. "In Flores we have a saying that 'all trails lead to

Apacaz.' I am of the Hacienda Matagordo—the estate of General Menendez, the Minister of War. There were twelve of us *cargadores,* but the others are far ahead of me, for I was last to leave the capital."

"The hacienda of General Menendez, it is very large?" It was Steve's habit to collect varied information concerning the countries he traversed from inhabitants.

"*Si!* surely it is the largest in all the world. Even the Hacienda Miramar of the good Colonel Villafarra is smaller."

Steve nodded. He was familiar with the Central American system of landholding by the aristocracy in vast tracts, and knew that Flores was no exception to the rule. It was specific information about the important personages of the republic that he desired; some tag-end of gossip that would furnish clue to conditions explaining Jones' offer. But he was careful. He knew well the blind loyalty of these simple folk to their overlords, the ease with which suspicion of an inquisitive stranger is born in their primitive minds.

"Your master, the General—he is not too

friendly with his neighbour? Or is that but the talk of lying tongues?"

"A lie of the blackest! My master rides often from the capital to Miramar. And Colonel Villafarra uses Matagordo as if it were his own. Nay, señor! They are friends of the dearest. Why, only last week my master rode swiftly from Apacaz to Miramar. Many great men were at Miramar that day, all friends of General Menendez. They talked long at table, with heads close together. Juan, a table-servant, told me——"

Suddenly he broke off, shooting an uneasy glance at Steve. It was as if some subconscious warning had jogged his slow brain; instantly a mask of impenetrable stolidity curtained his dark features.

"I—I must go, señor, else the foreman will be most angry at my slowness. *'Diós!"*

Steve watched the stocky figure over the next hilltop, then spurred Paloma on, wondering idly what bit of local gossip the packer had almost let slip. Some trivial incident, doubtless; to these simple folk of drab, uneventful lives the slightest movement of their betters has keen interest. Still, Steve wished the man had finished.

His depression was fading. In the sparkling mountain-air, astride Paloma the Incomparable, with six-guns sagging at his hips and Winchester beneath his leg, he felt more than ordinarily capable of handling whatever situation might confront him. Texas, he reflected, was a long way off. If the law's hounds should nose out his trail, there was good chance of winning to other sanctuary. It was the thought that he had a trouble he dared not face that irked him most.

Just at noon Paloma halted before a squat adobe inn beside the trail. Steve dismounted and led Paloma to the rear, where he unsaddled and watched a *mozo* feed her, then went inside to the dusky front room. The sullen landlord promised breakfast within an hour, so Steve tilted a bench against the wall in a corner, and, with hat-brim low, prepared to doze.

But horses halted outside at that moment. Steve heard the murmur of low voices; footsteps crossed the veranda and entered the adjoining room. Steve felt small curiosity concerning the newcomers, but when the landlord appeared silently in the rear door to stare at him, then turned away with the ghost of a satisfied smile, Steve sat up.

The room in which he sat occupied half the width of the T-shaped house, so that its front, rear, and one side wall were of adobe. The partition against which Steve leaned, which separated him from the room in which the strangers talked softly, was of rough cedar planking. Steve searched the wall for a knothole. None was visible, but after a moment he smiled and moved the bench so that it leaned against the partition where the planks joined the adobe front wall of the house.

The mud bricks were so roughly laid that the edge of the partition failed by an inch to rest solidly against the adobe. While Steve could not *see* into the next room, he could hear plainly. As he listened Steve went suddenly rigid. The conversation was in English, and the man speaking was—Simon Jones!

"Landlord says nobody's here but a *gringo* miner, who's asleep. Now I've done ever'thing you said an' we're sittin' pretty. Still—— How's ever'thing in Apacaz now? I ain't heard a thing since I left two weeks ago. Has——"

"Careful!" came a deep-toned warning. "The very walls have ears"—Steve grinned at this—"and even in my own house I sometimes think

I'm spied upon. Indeed, it would be very strange if Gomez' agents were not watching me! But matters in Apacaz are almost as when you left.

"Mays' concession is to be passed at Congress next session. Gomez has ordered it so. Indeed, ordinarily it would be passed without a dissenting vote. Gomez holds Congress cowering like dogs beneath a whip-lash. But, since *I* take a hand, there is no danger of our plans so miscarrying. The—danger will be removed before the Mays' Bill *comes* to Congress. *Por Dios!* I say that grant shall not pass!"

After an instant's silence the deep, level tones sounded slowly, as if but voicing reflections of the speaker.

"Mays has worked marvels with the Dictator. Never have I seen Gomez the hard-headed so affected by any man. Why, he would make the American financial adviser of the republic, at fabulous salary, did Mays but consent. Gomez has favoured Mays above everyone in the matter of these oil-lands—has made concessions before Mays asked them."

"It's settled, then, that Tri-Flag's out o' the runnin'?"

"Yes. Gomez vows that Tri-Flag will get

nothing in Flores. He has found that Tri-Flag is reputed unscrupulous in its dealings. Mays, says Gomez, is quixotically honest. Well, perhaps. But *I* am against Mays!"

"Snubbed you once, didn't he?" Jones' inflection was guardedly malicious.

"He was insolent! Choose your words more carefully! Between Mays and *me* can be no question of *snubbing!*"

Steve's eyes narrowed thoughtfully. While his eavesdropping was bringing unexpected results, the information only befogged him more. He analysed the situation flashingly. Jones was agent for someone needing a gunman for—unless Jones' manner deceived—desperate work. The man of the commanding voice evidently dominated Jones. Perhaps *he* was one of the mysterious "powerful interests." A valuable oil-concession was to be granted one Mays, by the Dictator's command. But the unidentified speaker had promised that *he* would prevent the Bill's passage.

Now Steve came to what was, to him, the crux of the whole matter. Was this opposition to the oil-concession the matter requiring a tight-mouthed killer—required "*El Diablo*" Lawhorn?

Nothing he had overheard made this seem more than a possibility, but—— Steve frowned. He found the whole affair most puzzling.

"Saw little Morales at San Anselmo last week," said Jones suddenly. "He was inspectin' the garrison. You couldn't help realizin' that he's Staff Colonel Morales, the Dictator's stepson." He chuckled sardonically. "What I wanted to say is, he's straddlin' his high, high horse again. Sore because you don't take him into your plans more. He let me understand pretty plain that bein' Gomez' heir-apparent an' also a wise guy, he's no small spud."

"José Morales is a little peacock!" snapped the other. "His vanity—which is all of him—is very tender. But I can always manage him. A mouthful of glittering promises and José comes to heel again. A young fool, as Pedro Morales, his father, was an old fool before him. But José lacks his father's iron steadiness and doglike faithfulness to Ruy Gomez. Mad over any pretty face. It was fortunate for little José that his mother's beauty captivated the Dictator, that she married Gomez.

"Now, in a few moments—when I have eaten—

I ride on to Apacaz. Do you attend to the two matters you know of, then report to me. I have another detail for you to arrange. It is a sheer stroke of genius, and very simple. I will tell you about it later. When you return we will also see to this man Lawhorn. Are you sure that your information concerning him is correct?''

''Absolutely! There was a fellow in Flores last year from Lawhorn's home-town, an' I got plenty o' dope on Lawhorn. He's still wanted for first-degree murder. Skipped from Texas into Mexico six years ago. Well, he'll land in Apacaz about four days from now. I sent him the long way around so's to beat him there. I——''

Steve let his head droop suddenly to one side, faking a raucous snore. Wellnigh soundless footsteps outside had caught his ear. The landlord came in and set dishes upon a table, then crossed the room and touched Steve's shoulder. Steve straightened with a jerk, opening his eyes in a blank stare.

''Breakfast,'' grinned the innkeeper.

While he demolished the meal of beefsteaks and black beans Steve heard the pair in the other room go out and ride away. He wanted very much to

see Jones' companion, but the landlord blocked the front door and stared steadily, so Steve simulated engrossment in the food.

As he ate, he mulled over the conversation he had overheard. When his cigarette was lit he turned to the surly landlord.

"How far to Apacaz?"

"Four hours' ride."

Steve nodded satisfaction. He had concluded that existence in Flores just then was too complicated to suit him, and he saw a simple way out. Jones, apparently, had not reflected that the soldier of fortune might take this course to escape the tentacles of Tierra Rica and Texas, as well as the blow to his pride involved in taking a job under threats. Steve grinned shadowily as he considered his plan.

Take a job or be turned up? Not much! Morg Conner had remained in Guatemala four months before, when Steve had thrown in his fortune with Federico Pelaya. Morg was managing the Hacienda Tucucares, largest cattle-ranch in Guatemala. Now, as Steve knew from first-hand investigation, it was barely a day's ride from Tucucares to utter wilderness, over which Guatemala held the barest letter of authority. There-

fore Stephen Lawhorn would ride on to Apacaz, as Jones expected, but only to ride out at dark and disappear in the mountains. If there was pursuit——

Paloma's level gait held more of speed than anyone but Steve and Morg Connor had ever gussed. But alarm might be given by the telegraph—— So Steve snapped his fingers peremptorily, and the innkeeper, turning sullenly about, faced, not the gentle-voiced rider he had ventured to snub insolently a moment before but a hard-eyed representative of the explosive white race. He acknowledged the metamorphosis with respectful cringing.

"The telegraph-line of Flores!" demanded Steve. "Is it the same as that of Tierra Rica and other Central American countries?"

"*Sí,* señor! All the republics are connected by the *Linea Telegráfico de Americo-Central.* From Guatemala to Panama stretches the single unbroken wire that is the *linea.*"

"There is none other? All messages, whereever sent, must go over that one wire?"

"*Sí,* señor!"

Steve nodded. This tallied with all he had ever heard. Many times he had ridden beneath

the single wire that is strung from pole or living tree in the jungle-depths. He knew how difficult the task of keeping it in operation; during the rainy season falling trees often parted the wire, and finding a break or ground on the *linea* was almost a matter of riding its length. So, if he, riding north from Apacaz, should snip the low-hung wire in a few places——

So Steve smiled pleasantly upon the landlord, somewhat to that worthy's bewilderment, and paid his score. He was whistling quite cheerfully when he saddled Paloma and jogged out upon the widening white road toward the capital of Flores.

Chapter III

APACAZ

THE road to the capital, having reached the higher levels, had fewer panting climbs and descents than in the foothills. The chalky reaches were dotted with riders and foot-passengers, strings of burdened pack-mules and creaking ox-carts, all bound for Apacaz.

Having practically settled his future actions, Steve dismissed from his mind the unpleasant jog his memory had received. He slouched comfortably in the big swell-fork and exchanged genial greetings with his fellow-travellers, while Paloma single-footed past terrace-like slopes chequered with squares of emerald sugar cane or red-berried coffee. Toward four o'clock the white *mula* plodded up a steep shoulder of the Cordilleras and stopped with an explosive sigh upon a flat *mesa,* from which all the slopes and valleys to the east seemed to slant downward and away. Steve stared across the jumbled landscape below to where, miles eastward, land ended in misty

greyness, and outward, far as eye might reach, stretched a shimmery argent shield.

"Why, it's the Caribbean Sea!" said Steve aloud, then whirled at a surprised gasp at his back.

He stared, for sitting a tall bay mare on the hillside just above him was a slim girl of twenty or thereabout in smart tailored whipcords, a broad Panama upon her dusky hair, regarding him fixedly. Steve studied her swiftly from trim tan boot-toes to those splendid eyes that seemed violet in one instant, almost black the next. Then he doffed Stetson and bowed formally.

"Pardon me! I didn't mean to startle you but—we didn't observe you until you—spoke."

"It doesn't matter in the least," the girl returned coolly. Then her indifference—assumed, perhaps, in instinctive revenge for having been startled—faded as unobtrusively, but narrowly, she took his measure, from stubbled, high-nosed face to high-heeled "punchers'" boots and heavy spurs. Far back in the violet eyes was born a tiny gleam of amusement; there was a hint of sophisticated superiority in her expression, much as if she had come upon a child playing Indian, as her eyes rested upon the crossed cartridge-

belts about his lean waist, the sinister white butts of the Colts in tied-down holsters. Then her gaze roved back to the grave, almost sombre, features, the steady, green-grey eyes with radii of tiny wrinkles at the outer corners, that met hers so unimpressed.

"You're rather an alarming figure to encounter without warning," she smiled.

Instantly Steve was in his shell. In her tone was the same irritating shade of patronage Jones had exuded when telling Steve that he had met a wiser man.

"I suppose a—feminine tenderfoot *would* find that so," he replied. The drawl had vanished from his voice, with the slurred *r's* which were heritage from his mother. The girl's eyes widened a trifle, then, woman-like, she edged her tone to punish him for having again startled her.

"You see," she explained, "you're the first American I've met in my three months in Flores who felt it necessary to go so—ah—heavily armed."

"May I smoke?" he replied solemnly to this.

He shook tobacco into a brown paper, and she watched with ostentatious interest until he had

twirled the "makings" into a slim cylinder. Then she shook her head and sighed.

"They always do it with one hand—in the movies!"

"So I hear. Them movies must be a heap educational."

Somehow she gained the impression that it was *she* who furnished material for a jest. It was not pleasant to be mocked by this long, unkempt man she had intended to make game of instead. So she tilted her chin and prepared to annihilate him.

"They are educational. Haven't you noticed that it's only in period-pictures, portraying the very early days of the West, that riders wear *two* guns?"

But his eyes had been wandering mechanically over her mare. Now he swung down.

"End of your *látigo's* worked almost off," he remarked tonelessly. "If you'll get down for a moment——"

She hesitated briefly, then obeyed. He caught her deftly and set her upon the ground, then unsaddled the mare swiftly. With a raw-hide thong taken from his saddlebags he made a new lacing

to secure the strap to the cinch-ring. Then he resaddled the animal.

"Natives can't be trusted to saddle," he told her gravely. "Better always look over the job yourself, otherwise you'll take an ugly tumble some day.

"About the two guns; I reckon I'm 'way behind in styles; I haven't seen a movie in nearly six years."

"I beg your pardon!" she cried contritely. "I had no earthly right to laugh because your dress differs from that of the foreign colony in the capital."

"Why, that's all right," smiled Steve. "I must look pretty ferocious just now. Besides, you'd hardly brush against a cowpunch' in working-rig."

"I don't remember seeing many cowboys," she agreed, "not even in the States. My knowledge of the West is limited to what I saw in two years at Mill College, in California; and Oakland and San Francisco, you know, are hardly cow-towns. You've been down here several years?"

"Six." It came to Steve that he had forgotten himself. As soon as this girl heard his name she

would withdraw as if he carried pestilence. Moved by the stubborn pride that years of snubs had only intensified, he met her eyes squarely.

"I came to Mexico from Texas then. Since that time I've wandered up and down the banana republics. Ranch-work, placer-mining, and—revolutions."

"Oh, a revolutionist!" She regarded him with sharpened interest.

"A soldier of fortune, rather. I am Stephen Lawhorn."

Her startled face told him that she had heard his name before. She took a quick step in retreat, while he watched with the beginning of a little cynical smile. Then she halted to stare openly, appraisingly. Slowly the clear eyes mirrored puzzlement; then she smiled flashingly upon him.

"I can't believe all that I've heard of you!" she said abruptly.

He could only stare, for she was not running true to form.

"Oh, I've heard perfectly *terrible* things—things you—you did when you were with the bandit Zapata in Mexico."

"Whether you believe it or not, I have never seen Zapata, though our gang chased him for

three days once. I was forced into service with Rojo Sanchez in Chihuahua, and was his machine-gunner for a year. That Zapata business was saddled upon me by liars. 'Give a dog a bad name,' you know."

"You don't *look* at all terrible. But those stories——"

"Yes, I know. I plead guilty to a good many actions not sanctioned by the etiquette books, but at the time of performance they seemed necessary, if not inevitable. I can offer no fuller defence. Just now I'm riding north. I crossed the border yesterday a jump ahead of Tierra Rican troopers. I was Chief of Staff of Federico Pelaya's revolutionary army, and that revolution is smashed."

"I see. And now?"

"Now? A job, for choice. I'm sick of these petty squabbles. The Tierra Rican affair was my sixth."

"You don't think of going back to your home—to Texas?"

"Often!" he sighed, brought to realization, by this flick on the raw, of the impassable gulf that yawned between him and the "respectable" world. He stared out across the slopes, more of

nostalgic longing in his eyes than he knew. "But—— Oh, I guess I'll be a wandering cow-punch' always. Do you know, you're the first white girl to toss a decent word my way in years, Miss——"

"I am Estelle Mays," she said, and he stared so long that she flushed. "Perhaps you've heard of my father, Howard Mays?"

Steve nodded absently. His thoughts had flashed back to the mountain inn: "Gomes has favoured Mays above everyone in the matter of these oil-lands." And this girl, whom he began to like sincerely, was the oil-man's daughter!

"I've heard of him. He's—getting an oil-concession, isn't he? Or has it?"

"He's to get it as soon as Congress meets. President Gomez has promised that the Bill will be passed then. Three weeks; then that part will be finished." She stared unseeingly across the vista at her feet. "It seems, sometimes, that we've been here always. It has been hard. So much politics at first; so many obstacles we hadn't foreseen. Then my father and the President became friends, and—the difficulties vanished magically.

"It was rather a gamble, our trip here. It

meant so much—wiping out the financial disasters of three bad years.'' She broke off with an apologetic little laugh.

''I'm thinking aloud. I won't bore you with our troubles, particularly when we're 'out of the woods' now—or will be when Congress meets.''

Steve had been reading between the lines. He could appreciate this desperate gambling, standing to win or lose all on one roll of the dice. And Mays had won. Or had he? Steve knew Ruy Gomez, Flores' Dictator, by repute—a big man of unmixed Mayan blood, educated in the iron system of a German university. By sheer force of personality Gomez had made himself autocrat of the country. This, a herculean feat, was simplicity itself compared to *maintaining* for twenty years his hold upon governmental reins without experiencing a really serious attempt at his overthrow.

Gomez was said to be both honest and able, giving his fierce, childlike people as fair administration as they could understand, without relaxing for an instant his iron grasp. So, with Gomez on his side, Mays held an ''edge'' on his rivals.

"We should be moving on," suggested Steve. "It's nearly five."

He helped the girl into the saddle, then mounted Paloma. They jogged forward stirrup to stirrup, Steve busied with his jumbled thoughts, Estelle Mays studying the shifting expressions upon the face of this unorthodox new acquaintance, the strange man himself, whose speech and manner contrasted so sharply with his reputation.

"Will you stay long in Apacaz?" she asked finally.

"I—don't know," he replied undecidedly. "I'm not sure—yet."

"I asked because I'd like you to meet my father. I'm sure," she smiled, "that he'll be glad to revise his opinion of you—as his daughter has done."

"But don't you see, Miss Mays," he objected frowningly, "that you can't revise the opinion of the rest of the world? If you ask me to your home, say, that may easily create friction, hamper your father's dealings with folk here. Why, even President Gomez would warn you against any association with me."

She faced him, chin well up, level-eyed as a

man, with one of the flashing transitions from utter femininity to the disconcerting sexlessness of a boy that he found both bewildering and—fascinating.

"Mr. Lawhorn," she told him stiffly, "my father and I reserve the right to form our own opinions, to associate with whom we please. I'm inviting you to call to-morrow morning, if you're free."

A sudden warmth was born in Steve Lawhorn's heart. It was not enough, by far, to erase memory of ostracism by others of this girl's—his own—class, but it went far toward melting the surface frozen by years of harsh treatment. He raised his Stetson with the grave dignity which—because of what it told of a heritage of breeding—had surprised her earlier in the afternoon.

"I am greatly honoured," he said formally, then they kept silence for a time.

"Apacaz!" announced the girl, half an hour later. The animals had topped a long slope and were now on the rim of a broad tableland set in a semicircle of towering peaks. A long mile before them, red-tiled roofs glowing like rubies in the late sunlight, sprawled the capital of Flores, with

the volcano Hombre Viejo—"Old Man"—rearing above its neighbours like a grim watchman.

"You've never been here? Then I'll guide you. This road runs into the Avenida Nacional —Apacaz' main street—upon which, near Central Plaza, are all the government buildings. At this end of the avenue, some ten squares from the Plaza, is the Hotel American, owned by an American named Dwyer. It's said to be comfortable, though not so popular with Americans and English as the Hotel Sultana."

"I've heard of the American. I'll stop there, I think."

"We have our own house," Estelle continued. "It's No. 10, Calle Grande, near the Plaza. Tomorrow morning, remember, you're to call there."

"I'll be there!" he assured her smilingly. "But *who* is this coming?"

They were nearing the outskirts of town, and toward them galloped a slender young native in Prussian-blue uniform-tunic and flaming scarlet breeches. Upon his shoulders were massy golden epaulets; his breast blazed with an array of medals and badges worthy of a third-rate European princeling. Estelle, glancing covertly at her shabbly companion, caught a twinkle of

quiet amusement in the shrewd green-grey eyes.

"Why, that's Staff Colonel José Morales. President Gomez' stepson. I *think*"—this with another side-glance at Steve—"that he comes to meet me."

With a jerk of the reins that sent the black Arab-Peruvian to its haunches, Morales slid to a stop, and with French cap at knee bowed to the stallion's neck.

"Ah, Meess 'Stelle!" he cried, straightening. "I have gallop' to look for you. For why," he said reproachfully, "have you not say that you ride to-day? I have look and look for you! *Everywhere* I have look! Ah, I shall for ever mourn the golden hours lost!"

"I didn't want company, Colonel Morales," smiled the girl indulgently. "But let me introduce an—an American cattleman, Mr. Lawhorn."

At pronouncement of that name Morales' black eyes bulged. He swallowed audibly, with effort, then drew himself rigidly erect.

"I have heard of the Señor Lawhorn! But not as the—*cattleman!* Señor, as Staff Colonel of the Army of Flores I have it to say that your presence is unwelcome. Flores loves not the soldiers of fortune."

Steve eyed the pompous little figure almost absently. He was recalling the mention of Morales overheard at the mountain inn. Estelle darted an uneasy glance at the tall American.

"At least, Colonel Morales," she said brightly, to cover the awkwardness of the moment, "don't mix your official and social sides when with *me*. Now that you're here you may escort me home—from the Hotel American. Mr. Lawhorn will share the duty that far."

With Morales' prancing stallion at one stirrup and Paloma single-footing placidly on the other side, Estelle kept conversation running in safe, general channels, dividing her attention as equally as possible between the men. Morales ignored Steve conspicuously until the little cavalcade had passed the outskirts of the capital, then pointed to the sign upon a two-story building on the left.

"There, Señor *cattleman*," he volunteered stiffly, "is the hotel for yourself. I have the pleasure to wish you *adiós* and to say again that my stepfather, the President, has no liking for the soldiers of fortune."

"Good afternoon, and *not* good-bye, is what I give you, Mr. Lawhorn," smiled Estelle, and

Steve bowed over her extended hand. "Don't forget your call to-morrow."

"Good afternoon," returned Steve, Stetson at knee. "I'll surely be there."

He replaced his hat and watched the pair canter off, then turned Paloma toward the gate in the white-washed wall opening upon the American's stable-yard. Steve swung to the ground, to glance about him somewhat absently, for his mind was busied with other things. A *mozo* padded up to tend Paloma.

"' . . . A young peacock!' " mused Steve "'His vanity—which is all of him—is very tender. . . . Mad over any pretty face.' Well!" admitted Steve aloud, "Certainly the 'pretty face' is beside him now! What's that? *Sí, hombre!* Water and maize for the mula, then a stall. I stay the night."

Chapter IV

SEETHING POLITICS

"Sí señor, an *Americano,* tall as yourself, but of much more thinness, with a great black sombrero."

Steve stared smilingly at the great blackboard in the American's office, upon which, in accordance with police regulation, was chalked the name of each guest opposite the number of the room occupied. Arturo, the little native clerk, was explaining the identity of the occupant of No. 15, whose name, as scrawled, was unintelligible to any *gringo.*

"The *Americano,* he is in the bar-room even now," volunteered Arturo.

Steve moved to the door leading from office to bar-room. A lanky, booted man stood with elbows spread upon the long bar, a black Stetson pushed far back upon his drooping head. Steve's face softened at the sight, and gravity vanished instantly. With all the air of a small boy mischief-bent, he crossed the room noiselessly and

banged a hard hand between the hunched shoulders.

"You dam' idiot!" sputtered Morg Connor, whirling about. "Why'n't you hit me with a chair or table? You never did have the judgment of a locoed bronk, Steve!"

"Serves you right for camping in the barroom," retorted Steve serenely. "Why are you trailing 'way down here in Flores? Why aren't you hard at work in Guatemala? Explain yourself, white man! Explain yourself!"

"No law against my quittin', is there? You see, Steve," he grinned affectionately, "I had a hunch that you'd be in some sort o' devilry if I wasn't ridin' herd on you, so I come for a look—see. All over in Tierra Rica, huh?"

"Don't be dodging! Why'd you quit Tucucares?"

"Oh, old man Madrono died last month and left Tucucares to that useless kid o' his. I couldn't hitch with the boy, so I took my pay an' drifted. Thought maybe I'd hit Tierra Rica before the last brick was throwed, but when I rode in this mornin' I heard that Palaya was gone under, *but* that General Lawhorn had slipped out—as per usual.

I waited here to-day, figurin' you might drift through.

"Did you tell Arturo you're bunkin' with me? C'm'on an' I'll steer you to some soap an' water. You sure look like the frazzled end to a misspent life!"

"Don't get so personal," objected Steve amiably, as they moved toward the door into the patio —the open central square around which the hotel was built. "I can still remember how they used to rope you off your horse, so your mother could expose the basic colouration of your neck. You used to carry a couple of homesteads in your ears."

They crossed the cool, tiled patio and climbed the stairs to an encircling gallery upon which all the upper rooms of the house opened, in the manner of two friendly puppies.

Born at almost the same hour of the same day, in the big ranch-house of the *Circle Diamond,* it was natural that the boys should grow up somewhat closer than brothers, as their fathers—Jay Lawhorn, the owner, and "Smoky Joe" Connor, his foreman-prime minister—had always been. Except for the four years when Steve had been at Culver, while Morg remained on the ranch to

step into his dead father's shoes, seldom had they been separated for so much as a week.

As naturally as he had backed Steve's feud with Ramon Guerra, Morg had accompanied Steve into exile. The bond between them was so instinctive that neither of them gave it conscious consideration. Their very thoughts ran in terms of "we."

Morg threw open the door of No. 15, a broad room containing two canvas cots, with a wide, barred French window overlooking the Avenida Nacional. He sprawled comfortably upon a cot to watch Steve unpack the big leather *alforjas.*

From one saddlebag Steve drew a package wrapped carefully in brown paper, which, when opened, disgorged folded clothing made by the best tailor in San José de Costa Rica. Tenderly he laid out the garments upon his cot.

"A new suit!" gasped Morg, rolling his eyes dramatically. "New boots, too; silk shirts an' ties an' *white* collars! Steve, Steve! I always said college'd be your ruination. I can see civilization a-breakin' out on you in big spots, like measles. What price the brand-new Stetson an' the li'l tie with spots? You'll look like a soda

jerk. Betcha Paloma bites you first time she sees you in that rig. Betcha!''

Steve came out of the bathroom damp-haired, smooth-chinned, scrubbed to a lustrous mahogany of face and neck. Re-entering No. 15, he felt, if not at peace with all the world—for he remembered Simon Jones—at least untroubled by what might occur. With the happy-go-lucky Morg, whose carefree demeanour masked ''a first-class fighting man,'' at his shoulder, there would be small danger of unheralded blows from behind.

From skin out he donned new clothing, revelling in the *feel* of smooth linen and silk. His trouser-legs he pulled carefully *over* polished bootlegs, token of a ''civilized'' point of view. As he finished knotting the blue polka-dotted four-in-hand which had aroused Morg's derision a slight snickering sound came from the doorway.

''How about punishin' a meal?'' inquired Morg. ''You been tyin' an' untyin' that cra-vat steady for twenty minutes. Mustn't wear it out first day, y' know.''

They were served in the long, cool dining-room that opened an entire side upon the patio—the interminable courses of a formal Spanish dinner, from watery cabbage soup to most excellent *café*

negro. At last they sat luxuriously silent, with cigarettes between their fingers, to dawdle over the coffee-cups and watch the jewelled spray of the tiny fountain in the patio's centre.

"Where's this chap Dwyer, who runs the caravansary?" asked Steve idly.

"Search me. I ain't laid eyes on him yet. Arturo says he's a busy *hombre*—dabbles in ranches an' coffee-plantations an' other real estate. Not here half-time."

They finished their coffee and drifted to the bar-room. Dusk had come; in the long room the electrics had been switched on. At one end of the bar, busy with fountain pen and account book, lounged a plump man near middle height, in fresh tan linen, with expensive Panama cocked over one eye. He turned at sound of their footsteps, showing a pallid, clean-shaven face, with blue eyes round and hard and bright as marbles.

"Evenin', gents!" he grunted, speaking around the cigar clamped in the corner of his gash-mouth. "I'm Dwyer. Just got in from up north. What'll it be?"

They drank formally, Dwyer's little eyes roving constantly from Steve to Morg and back again, his heavy face expressionless.

"Strangers here?" Dwyer's inflection was purely casual.

"Why, just about." Unostentatiously Steve trod upon Morg's most convenient foot.

"Nice town you got," remarked Morg blandly.

"Yeh, not bad. Little hot, sometimes, but not so very. Too high up. I seen it just as hot in —uh—uh—well, *lots* o' places in the States."

"Oh, hotter; lots hotter!" declared Morg earnestly. "Why, I've seen days in—uh—uh—well, Arizona an' New Mexico, lots hotter'n it ever gets down here. In—uh—uh—New York, too, she gets plumb torrid sometimes."

Steve devoted himself to study of his scarf-knot in the bar-mirror, while Dwyer looked Morg over thoughtfully.

"From north or south, stranger? What country you from?"

"Oh, all around. Been pretty much all over. Just a-ramblin'—like the song, you know." Morg grinned winningly at the hotel-keeper, who smiled faintly in return.

"How's business?" asked Steve, for conversation seemed on the drag.

"Well, *fair*," Dwyer's tone was cautious. "All in all, fair. If sugar's low, then coffee

climbs a little, an' bananas. I guess we can't kick. Uh—you gents on business here? Figure on settlin' or somethin'?"

"Well"—Steve's face betokened thoughtful consideration—"maybe. Yeh, I reckon we'll probably settle—or *somethin'*."

"What-for a town is she, anyway?" This was Morg.

"Um—let's see." Dwyer rubbed a fat hand, pale as his jowls, across his chin. "Apacaz stacks up maybe thirty thousand. Principal industry's"—he grinned ponderously at his jest—"gov'ment graft, an' no outsider can glom on to that. Nice climate, an' prices, generally, ain't high."

"How about the female-people?" demanded Morg anxiously. "How do they stack up—against the señoritas farther south?"

"Wouldn't want to say," shrugged Dwyer, "not havin' seen the dames down south, But the society-skirts—the native ones—are *do-ll-ba-bies!* Get their uniforms from New York. You'd think, to give 'em the once-over, that they'd just French-heeled out o' the St. Francis."

"Let's go see for our li'l selves!" proposed Steve.

As they moved up National Avenue toward Central Plaza Morg was impelled to wonder about their host.

"Why, he's surely suffering from ingrowing bartenders' curiosity," replied Steve. "Furthermore, and also, he's conspicuously vague about his last place of residence."

"You should talk, the way you was walkin' the rocks! You like to *flattened* my foot. But," he grinned reminiscently, "I reckon I give him plenty places to study over—Arizona an' New Mexico; New York, too."

"His curiosity is quite natural, though," reflected Steve aloud. "These hairpins always wonder when a strange white man wanders in if the newcomer intends to settle and so reduce the pickings. I'll bet you, though, that mighty little goes on in this man's country that friend Dwyer isn't on to!

"Well, here's the Plaza. Wonder if the ladies come up to Dwyer's prospectus?"

"Probably not, but *you* should worry. Strikes me you're showin' a lot o' interest in womenfolk all of a sudden. Thought I always did the lady-wranglin' for two?"

"Oh, I'll flower the wall, as usual. I was only *thinking*——"

Down the gravelled walks of the Plaza strolled columns of young women in white, giggling, chattering, while from paths paralleling those used by the duenna'd girls the capital's young men ogled their ladies. For a time the partners watched amusedly from a bench commanding a view of both sexes. But there was no sign of Estelle Mays, and, once sure of this, Steve lured Morg away with promise of a drink. They turned into the Calle Grande, and a few squares beyond the Plaza came to a little *pulpería* with tables set upon the tree-bordered sidewalk.

As they clicked along the tiled walk Morg caught sight of a slim, elderly man in forest-green khaki at a small table set somewhat apart from other drinkers. Morg nudged Steve and nodded, then they hastened over.

"Bill Faraday!" they chorused, and the man came to his feet, with outstretched hands, a warm smile widening his mouth beneath the drooping grey moustache.

"*Bless* my soul! If 'tisn't the 'Texas Twins'! Si' down, children! Name yo' liquor. When did

yo'-all get in? Bless my soul! It's good to see yo'-all again."

They sat smiling expansively. Bill Faraday, Kentuckian, gentleman-adventurer in more lands than even he could recall easily, was an old and trusted friend, their acquaintance with him dating from their service with Rojo Sanchez in Mexico. They gave the information he had asked, in return demanding his own more recent history.

"Why, I'm Artillery Commander here," Faraday explained, in the faint, precise drawl that never left him. "Boys, I've the *sweetest* collection of scrapping hellcats yo' ever laid envious eyes upon!"

"How's politics here?" inquired Steve.

"Pretty quiet. Ruy Gomez keeps peace with clouts of the mailed fist. But he's a reasonable man. Ye-es, it's peaceful enough—not but what most of the aristocrats would welcome a change of ruler——"

He broke off suddenly at pressure of Morg's foot upon his. The lanky puncher got up lazily, looked about as if in search of something on the sidewalk. Steve and Faraday maintained easy postures without change of expression, though watching keenly. Morg edged gradually toward

the corner of the building; suddenly he made a dash and disappeared around it. He returned shortly, bearing a battered straw hat.

"His laigs are long's his ears," he drawled ruefully. "Faded into an alley up-street. *Peón,* I reckon. Dropped his bonnet."

The sombrero told them little of the eavesdropper's identity. An ordinary straw, such as was sold in every market-place of Central America, it was common headgear of the poorer classes. Steve watched silently while Morg and Faraday inspected the trophy. He was pondering a small problem. Like Morg, he had had a glimpse of a dark, sharp-featured face at the building-corner. More, he had identified the man as one who had lounged in the street-door of the American's barroom, listening interestedly while Dwyer talked to the partners.

"Do they spy upon *you,* Bill?" frowned Steve.

Faraday lifted a shoulder.

"Probably. Everyone is spied upon here. I was about to sketch the situation when Morg observed our audience. Gomez is absolute autocrat, but the aristocrats hate him intensely. Behind his back they sneer at him, because he is of

unmixed Indian blood, while they call themselves 'Castilians.' Castilians—hell!

"So, they oppose the Dictator as far as they dare——"

They listened while Faraday told of Gomez' most prominent ill-wisher, Carlos Menendez, the Minister of War, son of a Floreño father, but whose mother had been a Russian ballet-dancer. Ostensibly a rich man, stock-speculations had almost beggared Menendez; his vast estate of Matagordo was mortgaged to bankers. Faraday called Menendez the most influential man in Flores—after Gomez—and logical successor to the Dictator.

Gomez, by Faraday's account, had not wanted Menendez as senior Cabinet member; had appointed him only as concession to the aristocrats of Congress, with whom Gomez was perpetually embroiled over mineral-concessions. The Congressmen endeavoured to grant concessions to those interests promising the largest graft, while Gomez, according to the old soldier, welcomed foreign capital, but insisted that a fair share of profits enrich Flores' treasury. Also, the Dictator carefully investigated each company before authorizing a grant. Since Flores' constitution

did not permit passage of a Bill over the president's veto the Congressmen were powerless to award concessions to interests disapproved by Gomez.

Again Steve heard of Congress' coming session, when Howard Mays was to be granted a great oil-concession, affecting millions of dollars.

"You think, then, that Congress will pass the Bill?" inquired Steve thoughtfully.

"Steve, m'son," grunted Faraday, "when Gomez reaches for the whip those cowed lions of Congress perform! They snarl and growl, to be sure, but they obey!

"I've clean neglected to mention Mays' daughter. She's belle of the capital. Now, don't look interested, Morg! Yo' may *see* her—at a proper distance—but she's always squired by young Harrison, Vulcan Oil Company agent, or José Morales, the Dictator's stepson. Harrison's a nice boy, but Morales—— He's a 'Staff Colonel,' principally employed in displaying marvellous uniforms. But he's just as dangerous as a peeved *toboba*-snake. He'd have one knifed or poisoned, or shot in the back, if one threatened to interfere with any of his plans."

They drained their glasses silently. Steve

reflected that acceptance of the job Jones had offered would seem to mean placing himself against Gomez—and Mays. But if he should defy Jones—and Jones' backers—would that ensure protection by Gomez? Steve believed not. He had nothing to serve as entering-wedge with the grim Dictator. Gomez would more probably yield to the "pressure" Jones had mentioned—either send Steve back to Tierra Rica or hold him for the Texan authorities.

There seemed only one alternative to throwing in his lot with Jones' people—instant departure for Guatemala; and Steve found himself strangely loth to quit Apacaz. An idea came to him finally; he regarded it swiftly, then nodded to himself.

"That's my best bet!" he decided.

The friends left the *pulpería,* moving down-street. At the Plaza they halted.

"I live at the Sultana," Faraday informed them. "Yo'-all are at the American?"

"Yeh," replied Morg. "Say, Bill, who's this bird Dwyer?"

"*Quién sabe?* He's been in Apacaz about three years, I understand. Seems to have prospered; besides the hotel he is reported to own coffee and

banana plantations all over the republic. A shrewd customer, I should say.''

''Ever hear of a man named Simon Jones?'' Steve's tone was very casual.

''Don't seem to recall the name. Why?''

''I ran into him down south. Just wondered if you knew him. No importance.''

''I see. Now, how long will yo'-all be in Apacaz? Hope yo'll stay a few days, anyway. It's been good to talk with yo'-all again; I've been pretty lonely.''

''Why, reckon we'll pull out to-morrow,'' said Morg. ''Nicaragua, maybe Argentina—eh, Steve?''

''No-o, not to-morrow, Bill. Maybe not for several days—eh, Morg?''

Faraday's eyes twinkled at sight of Morg's bewilderment. He liked them well, the ''Texas Twins''; their arguments were always worth hearing.

''Difference of opinion in the family? Well, I'll see yo'-all to-morrow.''

''Now, what's the idee?'' complained Morg as the partners moved on. ''Here *I* am, all set to shove out *mañana,* an' you change your mind with nary peep o' warnin'.''

"Why, this is a nice town," countered Steve. "Why rush me off to the jungle before I'm half-recuperated from my revoluting? Shame on you, Morg!"

"What's the idee?" persisted Morg. "You never said nothin' up to now about wantin' to stick here. We can get jobs with Charley Cuttle in Leon. Didn't Charley say——"

"He did! Said we could have jobs any time. So there's no use of your straddling the traces like this. We'll drift down to Charley's, or wander Guatemala way, all right. Pretty soon, too—maybe. Why all the excitement? Say, *hombre,* are you broke?"

"Well, I——"

"Spare me the horrible details! I understand perfectly—now. You played poker somewhere coming south, and naughty men just gathered in your *dinero.* Morg, Morg! Not more than a million times have I told you you don't know poker's *alphabet!*"

"Well, dammit! I never held a decent hand once. I——"

"Yes, you're broke. Well, let's see. I've twelve dollars—American bills, too, Morg!—in my pocket——"

"Twelve dollars! Now, what the hell use is twelve dollars? *I* got thirty, but after friend Dwyer soaks us we won't have grub-money for the trip south."

"—*and* a trifle better than nine hundred in my money-belt. No, Morgan darling, I didn't gamble. It's my pay from Pelaya. I insisted upon cash in advance, and poor old Federico shelled out with all the joyous abandon of a Fort Worth pawnbroker. So there's no burning necessity for rushing off."

Dwyer sat behind the office-desk preparing to close up for the night. His round blue eyes shuttled alertly from one to the other of the grinning partners.

"Evenin'," he grunted. "Arturo was sayin you gents figure to pull out to-morrow, so I wrote out your bill. Here y'are, gents."

They stared speculatively at the heavy face. Then Steve inspected the bill critically, put it down, and smiled widely upon the hotel-keeper.

"Why, we changed our minds," he drawled. "We'll stick awhile, *if* she don't put yuh out none. You see, we figure to settle—or *somethin'*."

"It's your own affair, gents!" shrugged Dwyer,

tearing the bill across. "Er—glad to have you, o' course."

When the door of No. 15 closed behind them Morg whirled to glare at Steve.

"Why'n blazes did you tromp on my foot when I started to call him? Neither one o' us said a word about shovin' to-morrow, so Arturo never told him that. I'd ha' told Dwyer, too, he's too dam' inquisitive to suit my book!"

"Yes? Now, I begin to think he's a ni-ice man," purred Steve, yanking off his boots. "I saw you were set to deliver some nasturtiums to his address, so I—touched you gently."

"But why? Why? *Why?*" demanded the exasperated Morg. "Why shouldn't I let him know we don't fancy his burnin' interest in our affairs?"

"You might hurt his feelings, Morg," Steve explained solemnly. He switched off the light and wriggled beneath the covers; not another word could Morg insult from him.

Sleep was long in coming to Steve. He heard the new American clock in the post office tower announce midnight while he lay, shielding his cigarette-end from Morg's eyes. His mind was busied with a chain of events, of names and faces

—Jones and his alternately patronizing and threatening manner; the native of the commanding voice and ambitious plans, overheard at the mountain inn; Howard Mays and Gomez and Menendez; Congress and the oil-concession, in a mental dervish-dance. Estelle Mays, too——

Chapter V

JOBS FOR TWO

STEVE was silent during *desayuno,* the morning meal. He did not intend to tell Morg of the scheduled call at the Mays' house; Morg's tongue was razor-edged when he found a joint in the Lawhorn armour.

"Well," said Steve, with artful carelessness, pushing back his coffee-cup, "think I'll drift down town. Little matter I want to look into."

"*Bueno!* We'll wander anywhere you say soon's I get some more coffee. *Hombre!*"

"Oh, you needn't bother to come!" Steve rose hastily. "This—matter isn't important. Anyway, I'll tell you about it later. See you some more!"

Morg stared keenly after his partner's broad retreating back, noting that the grey suit was immaculately pressed this morning; that Steve was dressed, altogether, with unusual attention to detail; that he wore no visible weapon, having slung one Colt in a shoulder-holster beneath his shirt and left the other in a saddlebag.

"Now, I wonder what's a-bitin' him?" muttered Morg. "He's acted plumb mysterious—not to say civilized—ever since he got here.

"Well!" he dismissed the matter placidly and clapped for the waiter. "His head was always worth five o' mine at figurin'; he'll yell if he comes to boggy ground."

Meanwhile, Steve moved along the sunny Avenida Nacional toward Central Plaza. The sidewalks were filled with townspeople of all classes; occasionally an American or European passed Steve. He could read recognition in their blank, half-curious, half-hostile glances; Morales had evidently published the news of his arrival. Gradually the unfriendly attitude of these, his own kind, cooled the little glow of pleasurable anticipation with which he had left the hotel. It was one thing to make an unsophisticated girl believe in him, decidedly another to impress a hard-headed, middle-aged man, whose every acquaintance would draw horrified breath at the name "Lawhorn."

So musing, he came to a low, white stone house on the Calle Grande, set back from the sidewalk, with a colourful garden before it. Steve was too proud to seem to hesitate, even though beginning

to believe himself upon a fool's errand. He went grimly through the gate and clicked up the walk to the door. A little brown maid in orthodox cap and apron took his hat and ushered him through a hall into the patio, where, upon the verandah encircling the inner house wall, sat Estelle Mays with her father.

The girl rose quickly and came to meet him, noting both the subtle evidence of good taste in his clothing and a suggestion of rigidity that reminded her of his attitude of the day before, when he had told her his name and watched her retreat before its impact. So she held out her hand boyishly, and smiled more warmly than otherwise she might have done.

Howard Mays, a ruddy-faced, squared-shouldered man, stood waiting. The girl turned smilingly to her father, but Mays' shrewd, dark eyes were narrowed in keen appraisal of the big soldier of fortune, of whom so many tales were told.

"Dad," said Estelle, "let me present Mr. Lawhorn."

Mays shook hands gravely, and the two men stood for a moment openly studying each other. Then a slow smile, that reminded Steve of Estelle,

dawned in Mays' eyes; his lips curved beneath the close-cropped grey moustache.

"I'm glad to meet you, Mr. Lawhorn," he said.

"Thank you!" returned Steve, with answering smile. "For you seem to mean it."

They sat down, Estelle at her father's side, Mays' keen eyes roving over the tall, lean figure opposite, but always coming back to the grave, tanned face.

"Do you plan to remain long in Apacaz—in Flores?" asked Mays at length.

"I haven't made definite plans. When I met Miss Mays yesterday I was bound for Guatemala. But my partner was here before me, so that plan's off. You'll understand that there's nothing for me to do in Flores. My—*name* is enough for the average man. I can't get employment here.

"Also—as well be frank—President Gomez may invite me to leave at any time. While I have never made him any trouble, a soldier of fortune—such as I have been—is natural focusing-point for all sorts of intrigue, is not a good neighbour."

Mays nodded, and stared thoughtfully into the fountain for a space. Then he turned slightly, so that he faced both Estelle and Steve.

"I noted that you used the past tense a moment

ago," he said in business-like tone. "You said a soldier of fortune—such as you *had* been. Well, if you're really anxious to get out of this revolutionist-game—to find employment—I'll give you the chance. I believe that you've been lied about pretty extensively, else my judgment of men is getting shaky. Now, my company starts development work as soon as Congress grants me the oil-concession of which you've heard.

"We'll need good, energetic men for foremen; men with initiative; men who can boss natives. I'm sure you'll qualify, and, if he's cut along your lines, so will your partner. I'll put you both to work at the best jobs you can handle. How does that strike you?"

"Suits me to the ground!" Steve assured him earnestly. "But—you're making this offer with open eyes? Remember, it's *'El Diablo'* Lawhorn you're hiring."

"I seldom do business when blindfolded," Mays grunted dryly. "There's a condition, of course. It will be at least a month before we can start work; during that time you're to keep a clean sheet. Thirty days from now, if we're both agreeable, you and your partner go on my pay-roll. Suit you?"

"Absolutely!" Steve rose to go, and Mays got up also, holding out his hand. Steve gripped it hard.

"I can't seem to find anything to say but 'Thank you!' "

"Never mind the thanks," smiled Mays. "I fancy we've both done a good morning's work, myself no less than you."

He glanced at his daughter, who was smiling openly.

She put out her hand to Steve.

"We hope to see much of you, Mr. Lawhorn," she told him. "The latch-string is out."

Steve turned toward the American, whistling softly to himself. No unfriendly glances from Apacaz' foreign colony could trouble him now!

Morg was in neither office nor bar-room, so Steve climbed the stairs to No. 15. As he closed the door behind him, still whistling, a slight cough drew his eyes to a dusky corner. There, with chair tilted comfortably against the wall, a newspaper unfolded upon his lap, sat Simon Jones. The face beneath the broad hat-brim could have been no calmer if this had been his own room, Steve the intruder.

Steve regarded Jones for a long moment, then

deliberately he pulled off his coat, laid it across a cot, and sat down to face his visitor. They eyed each other searchingly for a space, then Jones' mouth twisted beneath the ropy moustache.

"Told you you'd be communicated with when you got to Apacaz. Kind o' slicked up these days, ain't you?"

"Come to business!" snapped Steve. "Yuh never sneaked in here to admire my clothes. What's your proposition *this* time?"

Jones' climbing eyebrows proclaimed mild surprise.

"Why, I told you the proposition the other day!"

"Yuh offered me a job—blind," Steve corrected him. "Yuh said yuh'd explain ever'thing here in Apacaz. Well, I'm listenin'."

"Uh-uh! Uh-uh! I said I'd explain *after* you took the job," grinned Jones, nodding wisely.

"Meanin' that I pass my word to back your play, regardless o' what I might be told to do? Not half good enough! Yuh got to come clean with lots more'n that!"

"Well, I told you that 'certain powerful interests' in Flores offered you a job. You qualify for

just the work they need done. In short, I'm offerin' you three hundred a month, gold."

"*Offerin'* me! Yeh! How do I know I'd get my money? Talk's one thing, cash is somethin' else again—an' different. Now, if I knew for sure who's backin' this deal, an' what he aims at, an' what I'd be asked to do, why—I'd know what to say."

"But you won't know, not until you pass your word to take the job. I've told you ever'thing I'm goin' to. Don't forget!" Jones added menacingly, "I got your number! All I gotta do is crook my finger, an'—back you go, to Tierra Rica or to Texas."

Steve regarded the cuff of his silk shirt with studied admiration. Jones leaned forward grimly.

"Well, is it a gunman's job at good pay—or what?"

Innocently Steve looked up. Slowly he folded his arms, and, under cover of the left shirt-sleeve unfastened three buttons below the collar. Now to test his plan!

"That job?" he drawled. "Oh, excuse me; I was thinking about Ruy Gomez. Great bird,

Gomez; mighty brainy. Just needs a li'l hint an' he sees the rest plain. I was thinkin' about him mighty strong.''

''What's eatin' you?'' snapped Jones. ''What's Gomez got to do with it? Except, o' course, to shoot you back to Tierra Rica or Texas, if you play the damfool!''

Very thoughtfully Steve studied Jones from under lowered lids, wondering if there were no way to pump him. The man was shrewd—very shrewd. Steve wished ardently that he knew what moved in the weasel brain behind the dark face. That the interests Jones represented were hostile to Gomez, and so to Mays, who had treated him with extraordinary decency, Steve was certain. The dialogue overheard in the mountain inn made him sure of that. But what form the ''powerful interests'' actions would take he would have given much to know.

''Can't you talk?'' demanded Jones furiously.

''Yeh, I can talk. 'S funny, but I was thinking o' doin' that very thing—talkin'. But about the job. I'm afraid my tender conscience might be hurt if I was to take it. So, thankin' you most kindly, I'll have to say, 'Not any, please!' ''

''You *what?* Say, Lawhorn, if you think I was

bluffin' you got another think comin'! You're cuttin' your own throat; you're good as dead! Before the day's over you'll find that out. You won't sneak away, either, Mister Man!"

"Oh, I don't figure to sneak, not noways at all," Steve assured him softly. "I'm plannin' a friendly li'l visit to the Dictator. Yuh see, there's several small details he likely ain't hep to—the opposition to the Mays' concession for one; *an'* several conversations between a fella name' Jones an'—'a certain powerful interest.' I reckon Gomez'll be mighty interested in what an expert like me has got to say."

"You ain't got a speck o' proof!" But Steve was listening strainedly, so he got the shadowy alarm underlying Jones' belligerent tone—proof that the bluff worked. "As for me—huh! Fat chance they got o' findin' *me!* Not many men in Flores has ever laid eyes on me, an' you got nothin' to prove you ain't just sparrin' for time. Gomez'd just laugh at you!"

Steve grinned as irritatingly as he knew how. He had Jones on the run. The thing to do was prod away; in his retreat Jones might drop something illuminating.

"Oh, you're wrong, Mr. Jones; entirely

wrong!'' The cow-country drawl was gone, and Steve spoke in normal fashion. ''I have much to lay before Gomez—if you or your employers insist upon annoying me while I attend my own private affairs in Apacaz. You made a serious tactical blunder, Jones—one common to mediocre intellects. You under-estimated your opponent.

''Didn't it occur to you that I'd never have gained the reputation which, for argument's sake, we'll admit I possess, without a certain ability to wriggle out of tight places? Surely you didn't think that I'd permit myself to be bulldozed into a service of which I knew nothing! Frankly, does that seem the natural thing for *'El Diablo'* Lawhorn?''

Jones stared bewilderedly. The sudden transition from lazy drawl to crisp English had taken him aback. Also, the germ of worry was working. He was wondering just how much he *had* underestimated this calm-faced man of suggestive reputation. Steve read his expression with inward grin.

''You're not well known in Flores? Too bad! But we may remedy that. In fact''—Steve's eyes narrowed grimly—''I plan to secure publicity for you, and at the same time furnish Gomez with

proof of my assertions. With you beside me——"

"Grab the roof!" The newspaper shot to the floor, revealing a heavy automatic aimed at Steve's belt-buckle. Jones' eyes gleamed like those of a trapped animal, but his gun-hand was steady. "I been holdin' down on you ever since you come in. I saw your hand go inside your shirt. I know you're heeled. Take that hand out—*slow!*"

For the fraction of an instant Steve hesitated. Jones' mouth twisted sideway; the pistol-muzzle lifted the barest trifle.

"If you ain't reachin' for the stars when I count two I'll plug you!"

Slowly, his face reddening with impotent rage, Steve withdrew the hand from his shirt-bosom and laced his fingers behind his head. With an effort he composed his features.

"You don't take *me* to Gomez! Now, I'm comin' over to get that gat. Better not wiggle an eyebrow while I'm doin' it; I'll drill you first move you make."

Jones covered the three steps separating them like a cat, sliding his feet over the bare floor until the automatic-muzzle touched Steve's breast.

"Don't try to make me look behind!" he warned. "If you do, I'll shoot, *then* look!"

He jerked the Colt from the shoulder-holster and backed toward the door.

"Just sit quiet while I pull its teeth." Jones slipped his automatic into the waistband of his trousers while he worked the ejector of Steve's gun. Five shells dropped out, then Jones stooped swiftly and slid the gun under a cot; straightened, with the automatic again in his hand. "In case you might think o' trailin' me," he grinned, "I'll just lock you in."

"Don't forget what I said about going to Gomez!" The greenish flame of wartime filmed Steve's eyes. "I'll surely interview him if I hear any more about either Tierra Rica or Texas. Gomez may not believe *all* I tell him, but he's already suspicious. He'll listen!"

Jones had opened the door and transferred the key from inner to outer keyhole. He hesitated, studying the big, motionless figure in the chair.

"I'm givin' you a last chance at three hundred a month," he said slowly. "Don't you think you're sittin' pretty because you've picked up a rumour or two. Even if I do decide not to have you sent back to Texas—well, there's plenty

quiet ways to shut gabby mouths *permanent!* What d'you say?''

''Just two words: Get out!''

Steve watched the door close; heard the key turn. By this time he had jerked his loaded gun from a saddlebag and was upon a bench, opening the transom softly. But when he peered over the door the balcony was empty.

As he resurrected his empty revolver and stood reloading it footsteps clicked outside. The key was turned and Morg came in. He stopped short to stare at his red-faced partner.

''*Well!*'' he grunted, when power of speech returned to him. ''You always was a kind o' peculiar *hombre,* but I never thought 'twould go this far! How come the door's locked from outside, while you stay so solemn an' all in here?''

''Who was downstairs when you came in?'' Steve reholstered one Colt.

''Well, Arturo's at the desk, an' in the dinin'-room the *mozos* are settin' tables for *almuerzo.* Nobody else in sight. Why?''

''Oh, I wondered.''

''You wondered? Wondered what?''

''How I got a name for gun-play, for one thing!''

The Colt leaped from the shoulder-holster with dazzling speed; Steve performed the "double-roll," the "road-agents' spin," then replaced it and drew again with the same bewildering rapidity. He repeated the operation a dozen times, winding up the exhibition by belting the second gun in his waistband and pulling both at the same instant.

Morg looked on silently, a vertical wrinkle between his brows advertising puzzlement. But as he noted the dark blood congesting Steve's face beneath the tan, the vicious tightening of Steve's mouth as the long Colts flashed up to the "ready," above all, the green flame in Steve's eyes, a slow smile was born at Morg's eye-corners. He gulped hastily, but at last could suppress his mirth no longer.

"Well, what's it?" snapped Steve, as Morg tumbled sideways on a cot in a spasm of noisy laughter.

Morg wrestled with his emotions while Steve glared. At last he sat up, wiping the joyful tears from his cheeks.

"Somebody's took you down a buttonhole, Stevie! 'S no use crawfishin'; I c'n read the signs, Brother Stephen; *I* c'n read 'em! I don't

know how he done it, but I'll betcha that somebody's just proved, to your complete satisfaction, that you ain't, an' can't always be, top-dog. · Oh, mother, why wasn't I here?''

Steve glared, but after a moment the humour of the situation came to him. Besides, he had successfully bluffed Jones, he believed. There would be no open move made against him, and for personal attacks he cared nothing. So he smiled, if twistedly.

''All right, cowboy,'' he conceded. ''Maybe you're right. But the story doesn't end here. 'Prayer-meetin' ain't over till the preacher goes home,' as Uncle Billy Patton used to say. No, sir!'' Grimly he reholstered the Colt, ''In the *next* instalment I intend to do a lot more talking than I did to-day. I—— Oh, let's go to breakfast. I'm on the ragged edge of starvation.''

Chapter VI

CONFIDENCES

STEVE lifted his head suddenly and pushed back his hat. It was past three o'clock, and the sultry heat of early afternoon, that had made the dusty cañons between the capital's rows of dazzling white houses unbearable, was lightening under a resinous breeze from the lofty, pine-clad northern peaks. Muffled hoof-beats had waked Steve as he sat drowsing in the bar-room doorway. He looked upstreet and saw Estelle Mays upon the tall bay mare.

Morg was dozing in his tilted chair, so Steve stepped outside and lifted his hat. The girl nodded absently; her eyes remained fixed upon his face. Suddenly she straightened in the saddle.

"Would you mind riding with me for a little while?" she asked.

"Mind! If you'll go through the gate there and get out of the sun, I'll have Paloma saddled in two shakes."

They jogged easily out of town upon the chalky La Cruz road. Steve sensed constraint in her manner; she stared straight ahead between the mare's ears, seeming oblivious of his presence. So he kept silence and studied her thoughtful expression.

They came finally to the hilltop upon which he had first seen her. The girl reined in upon its summit, and, with elbow upon cantle, she propped her chin in gauntleted palm and stared frowningly across the tumbled vista to the east. Steve, dismounting, lounged near by with narrowed eyes fixed upon the drowsy peace of the scene below. He came under the spell of it all—the clear blue of the sky, dotted by creamy fleets of cirrus-cloud; the long slopes, alternately red and black, where hills thrust up rugged shoulders, and dark-green with woodland; stretching away to the rim of the glassy Caribbean, miles and miles to eastward.

He turned back to the girl at last, and found her pounding riding-crop against extended boot-toe more and more viciously.

"Are you a mystery to everyone?" she snapped abruptly.

Steve shrugged, finding no answer to this.

"You puzzle *me!* I can't catalogue you, because you don't seem to be, as *I* see you, *'El Diablo'* Lawhorn, the dare-devil leader, the over-turner of thrones. Yet—— I asked you to ride with me this afternoon because I wanted to talk to you. Now I hardly know how to begin."

Steve waited, touched by foreboding, his grave eyes upon her face.

"I—— My father heard this morning, in a roundabout way, that you—you're a fugitive from justice; a—that you're wanted in Texas for murder and theft!"

She fairly blurted the last dread words, her eyes averted. Steve's mouth tightened, so that hard white lines framed the lip-corners. This was the first girl in six long, drab years to meet him as a human being; it came to him keenly just how much it had meant to step even part-way back to the old, dead life; came with increased poignancy because the experience was ended. Uneasily she raised her eyes, past the tight-clenched hands, until they came at last to his strained, sombre face.

"I couldn't believe it." Her voice was low and troubled. "I—— It isn't pleasant to learn that

one has been utterly mistaken. I had to hear your answer.''

''Why, it's true,'' he admitted evenly. ''The first part—not the theft-charge. *That* is included that I may get good measure. I am wanted in Saylor, Texas, for cold-blooded murder—shooting a man in the back without provocation of any sort. There is, or was, a reward of one thousand dollars for my taking, dead or alive. I should have told your father all this, but—— That charge has hounded me for six years! When you two met me as a human being I couldn't make myself lose your acquaintance by telling. The fact that it isn't true, isn't justified—the charge—doesn't make matters more pleasant.''

He turned toward Paloma, while the girl watched him steadily. But when he caught the stirrup to remount she straightened in unmistakable exasperation.

''Well?'' she demanded acidly. ''Is that all you have to say? 'Good-bye! We shan't meet again, of course.' ''

Steve dropped the stirrup and turned, bewilderment slacking his facial muscles.

''What else *can* I say?''

''You can tell me about it! You have the right

to speak in your own behalf. Oh, I knew, yesterday, that something kept you down here. A college man—I knew you were that—doesn't bury himself in these desolate jungles without good reason. As for your shooting a man in the back, I don't believe that at all. I'm waiting for your account."

She held out two slim hands imperiously, and Steve swung her down, keeping her carefully at arms' length as he bore her weight.

"Begin!" she commanded, settling herself comfortably upon a boulder.

So, sitting cross-legged at her feet, with profile turned toward her, he told everything, from earliest boyhood to the day of his outlawry. She waited for an instant when he halted at the end.

"You—you *killed* this man?"

"I had to!" he told her defiantly. "I am not apologizing; not even sorry. In like circumstances I would do the same without hesitation. He was just a human wolf."

"I—I think I appreciate your viewpoint," she said hesitantly, yet staring as if in search of the blazing Cain-brand upon his forehead. "I can understand how you feel about it, but—I can

hardly conceive the conditions that make such an action necessary. The environment was so different from any I've ever known."

"So was that of our great-grandmothers," he reminded her. "They killed Indians who attacked their cabins, and we pay tribute to their bravery. Why don't we shudder at the thought that they had killed fellow-creatures? I wouldn't have killed Jack Taylor if I could have avoided it; it would have pleased me vastly to hammer him insensible, instead. But I couldn't, and—well, I'm not afraid to face his shade."

He flipped away the stub of his cigarette and faced her gravely.

"There's no way to clear up the—the shooting of this man?" she asked thoughtfully.

"I see none. His fellow-killers were the only witnesses, and *they* swore that I shot him in the back without provocation. No, I suppose I'll wander eternally up and down the earth, always with Ramon Guerra's thousand dollars dangling over my head."

Estelle got up, and her hands came out to him in impulsive pity.

"I believe you! I believe *in* you, also. I can't understand all the circumstances that make you

feel as you do. Perhaps one has to experience them to really comprehend. But I do see that you had to shoot to save your own life; that the shooting was not criminal. I wish I—wish we could do something to help you. It's terrible to think of going through life barred from one's rightful place, an Ishmael because of a false accusation like that."

Steve held her hands dumbly for a space, not trusting himself to speak. She withdrew from him with a nervous little laugh and turned to the mare. Steve came over and lowered his hand for her foot; raised her easily to saddle-level. He stood for a moment at her stirrup, the late sunlight striking his short hair, outlining the well-shaped head as with red, smouldering fire.

"What you've just said means more to me than anything that's happened since I jumped into Mexico," he told her quietly. "I'll always remember. No matter what may come, I'd like to have you believe that."

Abruptly he turned and swung into the saddle, then they moved silently toward Apacaz. Where the trail curved, to begin the ascent of the tableland, Estelle turned suddenly to Steve, violet eyes narrowed slightly, holding a troubled glint.

"Now that we're friends I'd like to ask your opinion regarding something. You're experienced in the ways of these countries beyond any man I know. Will you talk to me just as if I were another man?"

Steve nodded.

"My little maid is a Costa Rican—doesn't like Flores. I say this to prove that her sympathies are not with any of the people here.

"I don't know how much you've heard of recent events in Flores, so I'll tell you that when President Gomez promised dad the richest oil-concession in the republic there was opposition from prominent politicians. Tri-Flag Syndicate wanted the concession also, and, from what I've heard, most of the Congressmen favoured it—for private profit, it's rumoured.

"President Gomez seems so all-powerful that it hardly entered our heads that any friction could persist, once he'd declared he didn't want Tri-Flag to have the oil-lands. You see, he didn't like what he'd learned of Tri-Flag; he doesn't trust Forster Gaylord, the syndicate's representative here. So he favoured us."

"I know," nodded Steve. "Much of this I've heard."

"The other day Dolores, my maid, came to me. She's sharp as a needle; very little escapes her. She said that while in the market-place two army officers swaggered in, drunk. They had just seen me ride past and were discussing dad and me. One of them mentioned the concession, and both laughed. Dolores repeated their words.

" 'Mays thinks the concession as good as in his hands,' the first man said.

" 'Yes,' sneered the other, 'but if a—certain one does not desire him to have it, what then? *I* think the Señor Mays is to be much surprised!'

"Both of them laughed, but suddenly seemed to grow alarmed. They glanced about nervously and soon left, without saying anything more.

"When I told dad of this he just—grunted. He isn't nervous, and, too, he trusts the President implicitly. But he told President Gomez about it, for when we dined at the palace day before yesterday the President smiled at me. He said we weren't to worry; the concession *was* as good as in our hands. Some of the Cabinet members, he went on, had at first favoured Tri-Flag, saying that it was better-established than dad's company, but all such objections were now withdrawn."

"What did Colonel Morales say to all this?" inquired Steve suddenly.

"Why, he and his mother looked bored. Colonel Morales takes very little interest in politics, I imagine, while his mother—this is her second marriage; Colonel Morales' father was Minister of War until his death—never looks at anyone but her son.

"Now, what the President said *should* dissipate all my doubts, and still—I can't seem to achieve peace of mind. It's more heart than head, perhaps, which won't let me wait calmly for Congress to pass the Bill giving us the concession."

Steve stared silently along the chalky road, smoking thoughtfully. Straws, straws—— Ever since he had crossed the border of Flores he had seen straws floating, without being able to determine the current that bore them, or the true course of their movement. In plain words, he sensed a strong, sinister undercurrent that threatened Mays' interests, but mysterious hints without apparent source were the only clues.

"You mustn't worry about those men's gossiping," he reassured her, forcing a smile. "Ruy Gomez is perhaps the strongest figure Central

America has ever produced. His word is law in Flores. Some of the Cabinet members and Congressmen are fairly important, but all bulk mighty small by contrast to Gomez. Please don't worry. You'll get the grant!"

"Do you really mean that? Or is it just an attempt to reassure a worried girl?" She was studying his face keenly.

"I mean it, every word! Three weeks from now you'll have the concession signed and sealed. Now you won't worry any more? Promise!"

She relaxed, displaying a most bewitching dimple in either cheek. Steve looked, then hastily he stared elsewhere.

"I promise!" she smiled, holding out her hand as earnest of the pledge. "You're a most consoling confidant. Did you know that?"

"It's good to hear you say it, anyway. I'll be happier than I can tell you if you'll just slant anything that troubles you on to me. Aside from my selfish desire to protect my prospective job I'd like to have you believe that I'm anxious to serve you."

"I do believe that!" she returned warmly. "I feel much better for having told you of my childish worries. Also I feel"—she hesitated, with

the colour rising slowly beneath the smooth skin of neck and face, then went on deliberately—"that your shoulders are broad, strong, and—straight."

Steve found his thoughts sufficiently engrossing as they jogged on townward. He had as much as promised that nothing should block Gomez' will in the granting of the concession. He prided himself upon always making his word good, so the action was directly up to him, yet he had not the faintest idea of what to do.

On the sidewalk before the Mays' gate they saw Howard Mays, with Morales and a slender, clean-cut youngster in serge jacket and white trousers, his stiff straw hat displaying a Yale-blue ribbon about the crown.

"Tommy Harrison," explained Estelle, "local retail representative of the Vulcan Oil Company, of which his father is president."

Harrison reached the sidewalk-edge a pace in advance of Morales. Without looking at Steve at all, he raised his hat smilingly to Estelle, who held out her hands to be helped down. Steve, dismounting deliberately, marked the little flush of triumph on the boy's face, and Morales' chagrined expression. Then the girl was on the

sidewalk, rewarding Tommy Harrison with a flashing smile.

Steve had nodded to Mays. Now he was comparing himself somewhat wistfully with Tommy, half-envious of the handsome youngster. He could not know that Estelle was comparing him with both Tommy and Morales, and finding his long, powerful figure most pleasing of the three, partly because of his air of grave maturity, the aura of dependability about him.

"Mr. Harrison," said Estelle rather pointedly, "this is Mr. Lawhorn."

Tommy shot at Steve an unmistakably hostile glance, then bowed stiffly. Steve inclined his head, suppressing the amused smile the boy's sulky dignity provoked. Morales was glaring at the big Texan, so Steve met his eyes and nodded courteously.

"So! You are not go!" remarked Morales ominously. "In Apacaz your business is—what?"

Steve shrugged. Elsewhere he would not have been so quiet, but Morales was Gomez' stepson, and so—at least in the presence of the Mays—Steve wished to avoid argument with the pompous little Colonel. It would not be fair to the

girl and her father. For the sake of the peaceful record he hoped to establish in Apacaz, Steve hoped Morales would not force a scene.

"I'm looking over your town," he replied slowly, "nothing more."

At what he regarded as insolent evasiveness Morales reddened angrily.

"Señor," he said threateningly, "I have told you that we of Apacaz are see many wandering white men. They are not good! We are ever pleased to see them in the back—to go away. When ladies and gentlemans come"—he bowed sweepingly to the others—"we are pleasured. But with the revolutionists, the gun-fighters, who ride into our city and swagger about, we are *not* pleasured! Señor, it is much more better—for you—that I see you not many times again. I speak for my step-father, the President."

"My hearing is at least normal," Steve assured him, with lips still softly curved. "But—I'm sorry, really—I don't know just how long I'll be here."

Despite the smile, Morales moved uneasily under the hard eyes that bored into his. Steve, taking off his hat, turned to the others.

"Mr. Harrison, I have been honoured in meet-

ing you. Miss Mays, I shall see you and your father soon, I hope?''

''Without doubt,'' smiled the girl. ''Our latch-string is out—still.''

Howard Mays glanced curiously at his daughter, then returned Steve's smile.

''Surely! Come up any time, Lawhorn.''

The genuine cordiality of the invitation waked a pleasant warmth in Steve as he jogged sedately toward the American.

Chapter VII

EAVESDROPPING—AND A NECKTIE

THEY returned to the bar-room after *comida*—the evening meal. Morg fidgeted restlessly during part of a game of billiards, until Steve put up his cue in disgust.

"Oh, drat billiards!" grinned Morg. "Let's go play with Bill Faraday."

"No, I'll stick here awhile. Want to think."

"Think!" jeered his bosom-companion, as from the doorway they watched the yellow lights flicker up in windows along the quiet avenue. "How d'you get that way? Better trail with Uncle Morg, Stevie, so's nothin'll bother you while you wrastle with them imitation mental processes. No? A'right! I'll go by myself an' be in *good* company!"

Steve grinned affectionately as he watched the lanky figure fade into the darkness upstreet. Years worked small change in Morg; outwardly, a cheerful drifter; inwardly, worthy son of "Smoky Joe" Connor, and a steely-nerved, ex-

ceedingly efficient man of war. In the face of Steve's problems that night it was pleasant to know that such an one as Morg stood at his shoulder.

Presently Steve stepped outside. He turned slowly down the cross-street leading toward the capital's outskirts, away from the lighter *avenida.* Natives passed him, ghostly in white clothing and bare feet, as he moved on, whistling the refrain of the foxtrot last to reach the tropics via phonograph-record. Turning from the cross-street to another which cut into it, Steve made a leisurely circuit, and after a quiet half-hour was within a few squares of the long row of government buildings facing the Plaza, and the big houses of various national officials.

Street lamps were economically wide apart here. As Steve lounged on a corner his grey clothing blended with the gloom. He glanced idly upstreet in the direction from which he had come, and the foxtrot died abruptly. A hurrying figure was passing beneath a street lamp, and with the glimpse he had Steve glided swiftly into the shelter of a tree on a sidewalk-edge.

The moon came from beneath a cloud, its sudden flood of white light making the street almost

as bright as day. Simon Jones, now within a yard of Steve, hesitated, glancing up and down, then hastened forward, keeping to the shadow of the buildings.

The furtiveness of his movements was in itself suspicious in that deserted thoroughfare. But, without that, Steve was keenly interested. He had been lamenting his forced inaction; now Jones spelled opportunity.

When Jones had gone past for fifty feet Steve slipped from his shelter and followed, adopting his quarry's method of keeping to the duskier shadow of the building-faces. Jones edged forward rapidly but cautiously, halting at each corner to stare suspiciously in all directions, then moving on, with Steve in pursuit.

They neared the Plaza. Over the housetops the strains of the band came distinctly. At a dark spot on a wall in the next block Jones halted. Steve edged softly forward until he could drop to the ground beside the same wall, barely twenty yards from the gate. He had identified the house as that of Carlos Menendez, the Minister of War.

A rapping sounded; three knocks; a space; then four in quick succession.

"Flores!" said Jones in a stage whisper, ap-

parently to a challenge from within. The gate opened to admit him, then closed noiselessly again.

Flat upon his elbows, Steve considered the situation, for Jones' visit to Menendez' house opened several avenues of speculation. Was this his hiding-place, or did he come to-night only to attend a conference, or upon some similar errand? At last Steve ceased pondering and rose.

"If it's important to Jones it's just as important to me!" he muttered grimly.

The wall was nearly ten feet high, of white-washed adobe brick. Steve could see nothing moving in either direction, so he leaped and caught the walltop, drawing himself up until he could throw a leg over and so wriggle to a squatting position upon the top. Then he swore aggrievedly beneath his breath, for the walltop bristled with broken glass, and he had cut his hand upon a sliver. He dismissed the slight wound from his thoughts and squatted alertly for a moment, listening for any sound from the gatekeeper who had admitted Jones. Then he swung over cautiously and dropped inside.

The moon emerged from the clouds again, and Steve found the gateman instantly, a squat blotch

sitting by the portal. Steve lay upon a trim lawn dotted with clumps of shrubbery. He crawled forward, moving from bush to bush, reached the back of the two-story house—that was made desolate-seeming by its shuttered windows on this side—and continued on a circuit of the walls.

On the side opposite that he had first examined a gleam of light split the black length of a shuttered window. Like other windows of both floors, this one opened upon a small balcony. It was an easy feat for Steve, standing upon the rail of the first-floor balcony beneath the lighted window, to extend his long arms to the fingertips and catch the floor of the upper balcony. He "chinned" himself until his face was level with the floor, then supported himself with one arm and caught the railing, hoisting himself noiselessly over it.

A murmur of voices came from within. Steve strained his ears for warning that his ascent had been observed, but house and grounds lay in deathly silence save for this muffled monotone inside. He pressed his ear against the crack of the shutters—long, iron leaves hinged to the window casing and opening in the centre.

"So that's off! He says he'll go to Gomez an' tell what he knows if we put the screws on him

openly.'' It was Jones' voice. The man paused with the sentence-end, as if concluding a report.

''But what *does* he know?'' The impatient question came in that commanding voice Steve had overheard at the mountain inn.

''Search me! I don't *think* he knows anything but what I hinted to him—about somebody in Flores wantin' a No. 1 gunman. But he's the devil himself for puttin' things together! He ain't named *'El Diablo'* for nothin'! An' he's no common roughneck, either; he talks an' acts like it, just to keep people guessin', but he's wearin' the trade mark o' some college right now. I'll bet my last red on that!''

''Humph!'' The grunt conveyed a wealth of exasperation and contempt. ''I am confident that you bungled the business, Jones. But I don't consider Lawhorn important, whether for or against us. He has no possible interest in affairs here; doubtless he will leave shortly.''

''Maybe so. But he's camped at the American like he figured to stay indefinite. He an' his sidekick, Connor, they've been mixed in more kinds o' hell than any other ten Americans that ever hit C.A. I just got a line on Connor to-day, an' if *half* what I got is true we better keep our eyes on

this pair. I think you're—*under-estimatin'* 'em, General, I do.''

''Nonsense! If they get in the path of Carlos Menendez they'll be trampled.''

Steve nodded in satisfaction. This was the Minister of War himself, just as he had expected. Indeed, none but the Minister—by Faraday's account most influential man in Flores after Gomez—could dare to scheme on the scale that Steve began dimly to comprehend.

''If these *gringo* rowdies''—Menendez was speaking again—''become troublesome, they can easily be—eliminated. As for their connection with Mays—why, is Lawhorn different from the other imbeciles here? Witness little Morales' subjugation at the Mays girl's hands!

''*I* think Lawhorn's refusal of your offer proof that he is *not* so dangerous as you fear. I believe that his narrow escape in Tierra Rica frightened him. As the Americans put it, he has 'lost his nerve.' But if I am wrong—well, there are many ways in which this pair can be removed''—significantly.

Steve put his eye to the shutter-crack and peered into the room. He could see Menendez, a frock-coated, imposing figure, with big, slightly-

grey head, lowered slightly. Jones was invisible.

Menendez turned his head slowly. His features were heavy without coarseness. The brow was very broad, seeming almost to overbalance the lower face; the eyes, long and narrow, were jade-green, as steady as a snake's. The hooked nose fitted well the wide, almost lipless mouth, the pointed chin. Altogether a strong, sinister face.

"You have instructed all those on the list I gave you?"

"All of 'em, General! They're ready. Comin' back I met R. I give him his orders."

Menendez nodded, and resumed his study of the rug.

"General." Jones broke the silence hesitantly. "Uh—you know that bunch o' mahogany on the Rio Dulce we spoke about other day?"

Menendez nodded without looking up. There was something about his moveless attitude that reminded Steve of a great serpent coiled patiently beside a game-trail.

"I'm kind o' short o' cash right now. I sure could use that timber——"

"To-morrow you will have it," promised Menendez.

"Thanks, General! You're always mighty

good. Uh—there was somethin' else. Old Sancho Ortiz died last week, you know. No heirs. What's to be done with his sugar-plantation? I —I been mighty useful to you, General——''

The hesitating whine ceased sharply. Menendez had merely raised his head, his green eyes glinting opaquely beneath drooping lids. But the changeless yellow face was somehow a menacing mask. Steve felt this, and so, apparently, did Jones.

''So you dare to bargain with me?''

Not one word accented above another, but in that even voice was a quality that stiffened Steve unconsciously; after the words sudden death seemed the logical sequence.

''I didn't think you'd dare, Jones.''

Then, within range of Steve's vision, shot up a trembling hand—brown, dirty, palm flung placatingly upward. Steve sucked in his breath sharply. Jones himself was still invisible—only that horribly quivering hand and wrist showed.

''You are a greedy hog, Jones. Toss you one reward and immediately you are eager to guzzle another. I have been too liberal. It is time to settle you once for all. Tell me, if I should but

crook my finger to certain of my servants, what would happen?''

''I—I'd be knifed, or poisoned, or strangled!'' gasped Jones. ''*Don't* look at me like that, General! I was only wonderin'! I don't care about the Ortiz place!''

He came in sight now, grovelling at Menendez' feet. Steve watched the abased figure contemptuously.

''Who would miss you?'' Menendez continued remorselessly. ''Who would ever connect Carlos Menendez with the vanishing of—Leo Gorman?

''You thought your secret safe? You poor fool. Do you think that I employed you without knowing your past? Why, I need not trouble my servants; I have only to notify the officials in—a certain American city and you will be extradited to-morrow. Think of the noose, Leo Gorman! Have you forgotten that murder?''

''It wasn't murder!'' yammered the miserable figure. ''Manslaughter was all it was!''

''Manslaughter only? Be it so. But there were other felonies. Life imprisonment would be the lightest sentence you could hope for.''

''I know it, General! But you won't tell! Think o' the help I been to you!''

"Get up! So long as you are faithful to me I have no interest in exposing you, but let me see no more of your sickening greediness."

Jones—or Gorman, as Steve always thought of him afterward—pulled himself shakily to his feet. A chair creaked beneath his limp weight.

"As you remarked awhile ago," Menendez said quietly, ignoring the scene just past, "most of the details are arranged. There remains the most important single matter, of which you know. Attend to that man's release to-morrow; see that it is accomplished secretly. Keep him safely and instruct him thoroughly. Rehearse him as I have directed.

"As for these Americans—forget them! Lawhorn, I am sure, is interested in the Mays girl. This afternoon I saw them returning from a ride. He was in gala-clothing; his cravat was blue, with white dots—a marvellous creation!" he chuckled. "But if they become troublesome we will arrange their elimination."

"Morales, he wants Lawhorn abolished right now." Apparently Gorman had recovered from his panic. "Says the girl's his an' he ain't goin' to stand any hornin' in. Says he'll see to Lawhorn; to little Harrison, too."

"*Nombre de Diablo!* That utter imbecile! Tell him I *command* him to keep hands off. This is no time for brawling with Americans—particularly with Harrison, whose father would turn Flores upside down if his son's skin were but scratched. *Dios* knows what such a furore might show Gomez! Tell Morales that I handle this in my own way."

Half-turning in his chair, Menendez took a cigarette from a silver box. He moved articles about the table-top as if in search of a match, then got up and opened a table-drawer. The next instant he was rushing toward the window, a revolver in his hand. The shutter swung swiftly open at his shove, but not before Steve's muscles, acting with the mechanical speed of a wolf's, had jerked him to his feet.

The shutter, swinging back, pinned him against the balcony-rail. Menendez' face and the extended hand pointing the revolver popped through the opening. Then Steve's right arm swung as on a pivot; the knotted fist smashed squarely against Menendez' chin. There was the pistol's crack and a bullet singing across the shrubbery, then, with the grunt and crash of a poll-axed bull, Menendez dropped backward into the room.

Gorman cried out profanely as Steve dropped over the rail. His figure darkened the casement, and bullets cut the ground at Steve's heels as Gorman pumped his automatic empty. The servants were evidently well trained and alert. There came a rush of feet from the house-corner as Steve dived into the shelter of a stumpy lemon-tree and began wriggling toward the street-wall.

Steve was thankful that the moon was behind the scurrying clouds. With Indians at his heels he needed all the advantage he could get. Noiselessly he inched across the lawn, halting at every tiny sound behind him. He was near enough to see the wall's dim bulk ahead when a rustle came from the bushes close behind. He rolled over and came to his feet as two vague shapes streaked down upon him. He struck out at the nearest, and the man crumpled silently under the terrific blow. But the other closed in; a knife cut a gleaming line toward Steve's body. He stopped the blow, feeling the blade slice lightly across his left palm; then clawing fingers were at his throat.

The man was almost as large as Steve. Ignoring the fingers that felt for his windpipe, Steve braced his feet a trifle apart and beat the thick body terribly with vicious "hooks" that carried

every ounce of power in his big shoulders. It seemed that he mauled the man for ages, though it could have been no more than thirty seconds, until a rib snapped under a crashing fist and the clinging figure sagged. The arms dropped, and Steve, turning slightly to set himself, shot home a final tremendous "right" beneath the ear.

The other servants were close upon him now. He leaped at the wall, caught the top, and scrambled over. As he turned the next corner downstreet the patter of running feet sounded behind him, and he dodged into a doorway, Colt in hand. Barefooted figures, long-bladed *machetes* drawn, went past like a pack of eager hounds.

In an hour he made only six blocks, for he moved with infinite caution, seeking shelter of doorways whenever light footsteps warned him of the pursuers' approach. The simple-minded Indians were evidently most serious in their efforts to secure the eavesdropper; Steve estimated that at least twenty of them were in the hunt.

Gaining the lighted Avenida Nacional at last, Steve mingled with the home-going crowds from the band-concert. He straightened his rumpled clothing as best he could, and moved swiftly

toward the hotel, hiding his bleeding hand and attracting no attention from passers-by.

In the bathroom he washed the bloodstains from hands and clothing. The slight cuts in his palm had already ceased to bleed. Morg was asleep, and Steve did not wake him. As his fingers fumbled at his collar he sat down suddenly. The polka-dot necktie, which Menendez had seen him wearing, had been jerked from his throat by the Indian he had grappled on the lawn.

Now it would be open war! From this moment on his life would be in very real danger every hour of the twenty-four. Menendez was not a man who dealt in idle threats; he would give no quarter. At last Steve shrugged resignedly and got into bed. According to his code, there was no use worrying over a matter that was settled. The heavy bar was across the door; he laid his gun beneath his body, where his hand would fall naturally upon it. Being rather used to hovering danger, he fell almost instantly asleep.

Chapter VIII

A FAIR EXCHANGE

LONG reflection decided Steve upon one point. He must tell Morg how they stood with Menendez. So that afternoon, when the *siesta* hour was past and the breeze made the outdoors bearable, he steered Morg to a secluded bench in the Plaza and unburdened himself. Rapidly he sketched the chain of events which had entangled him since arrival in La Cruz and meeting Jones—or Gorman.

"By Joe!" grunted Morg at the end. "This is *good!* Even if Mays hadn't offered us jobs, I'd say, Stick for the fun o' the thing. Well, since we gotta stand by an' crimp friend Menendez, what's to do?"

"Now, you tell me and I'll tell you! No use going to Gomez. Probably I don't know a thing he hasn't already learned. His secret police must have warned him that there's tension in Apacaz—in the country generally. If he hasn't moved it must be for lack of anything definite to

take hold of, and I can't furnish him that. I believe that Menendez understands that we're actively against him, but that we'll play the game with him outside official lines—if he does the same. He won't move to have me sent back to Tierra Rica or Texas; instead he'll hire somebody to stick a knife in my back—and yours, *amigo mio!*

"The whole thing's a tangle. My bet is that Menendez is puffing up the Congressmen with promises to back 'em, so that they'll surprise Gomez by refusing to pass the Mays' grant. Tri-Flag Oil would spend a million or two to get a concession of that size, and undoubtedly the Congressmen and Menendez would see much of that million. Now, if the whole Congress *should* dare to line up against the old man, Gomez could hardly bulldoze 'em into obeying him.

"He might dissolve Congress, of course, using the army to make his hand pat, but that would be desperate tactics—mighty desperate. He'd have to win overwhelmingly or go under. I wonder if *that's* what Menendez is playing for—to make Gomez risk everything on one roll of the dice—and fail?"

"Maybe. Anyway"—the war-light was glowing in Morg's blue eyes—"we can't pull out now

till the smoke blows away, one way or other. Let's get the dope straight. Menendez, plus Gorman-Jones, is backin' Tri-Flag. Must be, since there's just Mays an' Tri-Flag in the field, an' he's against Mays. Menendez is framin' somethin' to put the kibosh on Gomez; on Mays; on us, since we go on Mays' pay-roll when he gets his grant.

"*Bueno!* Until you left your cra-vat for a callin' card (that's what you get for *wearin'* a necktie!) Menendez wouldn't take us serious, but now we're on his black-list, too. *Um-hmm!* Well, sister, we better be a-sharpenin' up our tommyhawks, for there's sure as hell goin' to be bloody war between us an' Menendez!"

"Gentlemen!" drawled Bill Faraday. "Or should I say, 'Gentlemen conspirators'?"

Morg hauled Faraday down to a seat between them.

"Was you a-listenin' in on our plot?" he demanded menacingly. "You ever hear what happened to a certain long-eared cat?"

"Frankly," said Faraday, his eyes upon Steve's smiling face, "I heard only the last sentence. I *would* remark, if yo'-all insist upon a statement, that two Luggers may be added to yo' battery at

command, that wherever Menendez stands, *I'm* opposite. Now we'll let the matter drop right there, or—— Yo'-all can trust me, as I hope yo' know.''

''Bill,'' said Steve slowly, ''the only thing that makes us hesitate is our reluctance to haul you into *real* trouble you needn't mix in.''

''*Sho!*'' grinned the old adventurer. ''Trouble is the banner-lubricant for stiffening joints; excitement's that fountain Mr. Ponce Leon couldn't locate. If *that's* all that holds yo', why, orate, m'son, orate!''

So Steve told his story, and Faraday nodded thoughtfully.

''Dovetails perfectly with little things I've observed. But I fear that I can be of little help just now. Of course, yo'-all may count me in wherever an' whenever I'm needed.''

''Why do you say it 'dovetails'?''

''Oh, there's a tenseness in the cafés and drinking-places; gathering heads; low, mysterious conversations; odd signals between passers-by—all the Latin accompaniments to deep, dark conspiracy. Yo' know! I've seen the signs rather prominently of late. In the Café de las Estrellas particularly.''

"The Café of the Stars. Hm! What sort of cabaret is that?"

"Very interesting, in a way. Old Pedro Mendoza owns it, and he's by way of being a character. Shouldn't care to walk ahead of Pedro in a dark alley. But Pedro isn't the lodestar of the Stars. His daughter Carlotta is the magnet that draws the young bloods of the capital to the café—half Italian, half Floreño, and altogether devil. Amazingly beautiful in tigress-fashion; slow-moving, sinuous, languorous, or all vibrant flame, just as the mood moves her.

"Morales was at her feet—or under 'em—until the little Mays lady reached Apacaz. Since then he has dropped away from Carlotta's list of admirers, and—I sometimes wonder what revenge the fair Carlotta plans. She isn't the damsel to be won and lightly tossed aside! Decidedly a rose with thorns."

"So Morales was conqueror?" Steve's mind was more upon Menendez than the lovely and dangerous Carlotta.

"Only in a sense. Carlotta's no common light o' love; don't think it! Morales offered to marry her, and she bent more to the position than to the

man, I fancy. But yo'-all should see the place—and Carlotta—for yo'selves. The young firebrands of Apacaz gather there of evenings. Carlotta may sulk for a week, then suddenly decide to dance. When she dances—well, it's an event! I saw her once."

"We'll sure give that joint the once-over!" grinned Morg. "I'm real interested."

"Gently! Gently!" warned Faraday. "Carlotta is a noted man-breaker. Once she has them hooked she loses interest. She's of the type which could adore a man with exterior of ice and heart of flame—if such an animal exists. But she's not the only danger at the Stars; one of her admirers might develop a dislike for the colour of yo' hair and scalp yo'!"

"Oh, don't say that, Bill! You'll have me so palpitated-up that I'll be scared to go. O' course, Steve, he'll protect me if the party gets too rough, but you'll have him so nervous he won't go pretty soon. Won't he, Stevie?"

"Huh?" said Steve, looking up suddenly.

"Oh—peanuts! He wandered off, Bill. Just wandered away an' left us a-sittin' here. Poor boy! He's got a lot on his li'l mind besides that

red hair an' new Stetson. Guess I'll herd him back to the hotel, so nothin' can run over him while he rambles. Ready?"

"Huh?" said Steve again, then stared bewilderedly as they laughed. "What's the joke?"

" 'S no use tellin' him, is there, Bill? He'd be gone again 'fore I started."

Sadly, in the fashion of one leading the blind, he jammed Steve's hat over his eyes, pulled him to his feet, and winked at Faraday.

"He'll be O.K. after awhile," he imparted in a stage-whisper. "Just a li'l problem that's got him down. The word wasn't in his speller, so he ain't sure whether there's one or two 'l's' in 'Estelle.' Come on, cowboy; we're trailin' for home."

They wandered into the bar-room when they were done the evening meal. In this, the natural lounge of the hotel, they might sit at a table against the wall and find company, without company returning the compliment. For at the other tables gathered their fellow-guests, with idlers from the streets, discussing a thousand and one topics of local, and so national, interest over their drinks.

To-night the long room was more crowded than usual. One of those tides of travel, the cause of which for ever puzzles the white man in Central America, had borne travellers from all parts of the republic. Only the well-to-do native can afford hotel prices, so at the tables lounged men of the middle and upper class; coffee and cacao and banana planters; stockmen, shopkeepers, and small government officials. They drank and talked subduedly.

Snatches of conversation from a half-dozen groups floated to Steve, whose Spanish was more comprehensive than the average upper-class native's. But, strain his ears as he might for evidence of the undercurrent he knew was setting in against Gomez, nothing reached him that seemed of value. Not a hint of concessions, of Gomez, of Menendez, of Tri-Flag, was included in any conversation he heard. So he sauntered outside to the street. Morg lagged behind for a moment to buy tobacco, then joined Steve at the corner. They fell into step and strolled toward the Plaza.

"You missed somethin'," grinned Morg reminiscently. "Big Indian name' Araya just told the world an' all that Menendez is a yellow-livered, double-dealin' aristocrat. Said Gomez is the man

for *men;* real Mayan like himself. Mentioned Mays' concession, too; said if Gomez was against Tri-Flag, then so was he. Invited the bar-room to send Menendez to him for a nose-pullin'. The gang in there looked scared stiff."

They walked on silently. There was no hint in the warm, fragrant night of the violent death both knew hovered somewhere very near them. But if their faces were calm, their eyes were most alert. Menendez, from birth holder of the high justice, the middle and the low, over all the people on his broad acres, was not apt to consider a man's life as much more valuable than an insect's. To him they themselves were merely annoying details. Being troublesome, they would be removed as expeditiously as possible.

Flores, for all the testimony of its purblind foreign colony, its veneer of civilization, its celluloid semblance of modernity, was *not* modern. It was fourteenth century still, mediæval in its viewpoint, barbaric in its methods. Both knew this, and they did not intend to be caught unaware. So they went slowly upstreet, coats open, two buttons of their shirts unfastened, revolver-butts within easy reach, though hidden in the shoulder-holsters. Not that they really expected hostili-

ties here on the lighted avenue; Menendez was far too clever to make a direct move that might require explanations to Gomez. Besides, it was unnecessary; there were too many efficient, devious methods available in Flores to an ingenious, entirely ruthless man. But they felt more comfortable with weapons near at hand.

"That big fellow Araya was pretty much pro-Gomez!" remarked Morg thoughtfully.

"But you said that the crowd didn't share his opinion. I think I shouldn't care to insure Araya's life to-night; he's my idea of an all-around poor risk."

The band was playing when they seated themselves in the Plaza. Steve listened whimsically, thinking of other bands, other days; of circus-parades in El Paso and Fort Worth; of college-hops—— He came out of the reverie, and, lifting his eyes, met the level regard of Estelle Mays. An odd, pleasant tingling went through Steve as she beckoned.

Morg was covertly watching the scene. He grinned quietly at the colour welling up in his companion's tanned cheeks. Then they crossed to where the girl sat with her father. Steve introduced Morg, and saw that with one smile from the

girl his partner was made her faithful liegeman. Estelle made room beside her for Steve, while Morg sat down on the right of Howard Mays.

Somehow, Estelle had learned of the attack made on Menendez the night before. She leaned slightly toward Steve, so that he felt the tingling sensation again as her arm brushed his lightly. In a whisper she communicated the amazing story which was current in the capital. Steve grinned inwardly at the account of twenty or more desperadoes who had been foiled by the courageous Minister and his servants while attempting assassination. But he refused to speculate concerning the Minister's enemies.

"It interests me to hear that he has such daring opponents," persisted Estelle in the same guarded tone. "*He* led the opposition to dad, and I can't believe that he's changed his opinion. I regard him as our enemy, so I can't help sympathizing with others who oppose him."

"Remember your promise! You weren't to worry; you were to slant your troubles on to my rather accustomed shoulders and let me bear them." His eyes held hers until she smiled, somewhat uncertainly. She knew that she was flushing warmly under his steady regard. "I

will be pleased," Steve went on earnestly, "if you'll believe that I have but one aim in life at present—to see your father get that concession.

"You couldn't pull me off the job of watchful waiting if you tried. I'm keeping my eyes on everything here. I'll do everything in my power to defeat *anyone* who stands in the way of Gomez' will."

Under cover of her light wrap he patted her hand comfortingly. Her fingers slipped into the shelter of his palm, and nestled there as a frightened child's might have done. Again Steve knew that tingling thrill. Then calmness came to her face; she smiled gratefully up at him. Gently she withdrew her hand.

"You're—you're surely a good influence!" she breathed. She might have said more, for the violet eyes were ashine with warm gratitude. But Steve's face hardened subtly, and she turned to follow his gaze.

Morales was approaching. The little Colonel's darting glance found the group, and he hastened forward. At sight of Steve and Morg the red lips tightened, but he gave no other token of displeasure.

"Ah, señorita!" He bowed low over Estelle's

hand, the heels of his patent-leather boots together in the German fashion. "I have been desolated. I cannot find you for a time and I think you are not here."

At a loud command two barefooted little soldiers lounging near by ran up with a bench and placed it so that Morales might sit beside the girl. He rattled on, ignoring the partners, and Estelle replied sometimes to his inanities, but gave Steve the bulk of her attention.

At last the concert was over. They waited for the crowd to thin, then moved toward the street-entrance and halted.

"Good-night, Mr. Lawhorn," said Estelle, smiling up at Steve. "And, Mr. Connor, I hope you'll let Mr. Lawhorn show you the way to our house."

"He'll be tickled to death to do it," Morg grinned maliciously, "an' I'll be more pleased than that to let him."

They turned down a cross-street leading toward the Avenida Nacional and the hotel.

"Cheerful hairpin, Morales," grunted Morg. "Notice the lingerin' look he handed us?"

"That's just his sweet way of parting from dear friends," Steve returned slowly. His mind was dwelling upon more important items—smiles, and

eyes that were now violet, now duskiest purple with depths in which a man might drown himself.

Morg stumbled suddenly over an unsuspected elevation in the sidewalk and hopped for two anguished steps, anathematizing the darkness and the street-works of Apacaz.

"Hell!" he grunted. "This'd be a lovely night for a murder!"

It *was* dark; pitchy-black except at street corners, where ancient oil lamps marked discouraged circles of pallid light that seemed to make darker the surrounding gloom. They moved on cautiously, boot-heels clicking upon the tiles.

Then a silvery gleam shot past Steve's face; something tinkled on the sidewalk. Without hesitation Steve whirled, and the long Colt flashed from the holster beneath his arm; two lightning bullets went through the doorway they were passing. Morg's gun had come out also, only a split-second behind Steve's. He stooped to snatch up the knife which had hurtled between them. Then Steve yanked him against the house-wall.

"Come here, you idiot!" he snapped. "They can see us when we can't see them. It came from this door. Hell!"

His groping fingers encountered no door in the

opening. He poked and prodded with gun-muzzle without result, then pushed head and shoulders cautiously into the doorway.

"Just a shell! I saw the stars when I looked up. Well, it'd be plain suicide to go through. We'd be perfect targets against the white wall. Let's ramble!"

They took to their heels, and not until they had gained the comparative safety of the lighted Avenida Nacional did they slacken pace. Then Morg handed over the knife. It was a haftless, double-edged dagger, a foot long. Beautifully balanced, it made almost as effective an arm for close work as a gun, in the hands of an expert at knife-throwing. Only the darkness had saved Steve; two inches to the left and it would have skewered his throat.

"Cute li'l toy, eh?" grinned Morg. "Couple weeks more growth an' she'd be a full-grown *machete*——" He broke off suddenly.

"This is it!" he growled. "Betcha anything you like that *this* is why Morales didn't look peeved at seein' us in the Plaza."

"Well," replied Steve thoughtfully, "a necktie for a bowie-knife isn't such an uneven exchange. I'll just hang on to this. Maybe I'll get a chance

to let Morales use it for a teething-ring. I'd love that!" He whirled Morg about. "But wait a minute!"

"What's it?"

"We're going visiting! Remember Carlotta, of the Café of the Stars? We now proceed to inspect the lady, Morg!"

They found the Café of the Stars only after a quarter-hour of diligent searching, for Pedro Mendoza seemed superbly indifferent to the benefits of advertising. The café occupied a two-story adobe building on a narrow, ill-lit side-street a dozen squares from the Plaza. Only when the door was reached could one read the faded announcement of the place's character.

They were greeted at the door by the twanging of guitars and a plaintive *canción de amor* in a woman's shrill soprano. Laughter and gabbling voices rose high above the singer's effort.

Inside they found themselves at the end of a long, low-ceiled room, filled with tables, around which gathered men. No women sat with the patrons, but at the far end, beside a battered piano, were three blowsy, short-skirted girls, whose garb seemed to proclaim them entertainers. The place was disagreeably crowded, noisy, reek-

ing of liquor and stale tobacco-smoke and perspiring humanity.

Steve's roving eyes located Morales, seated with a tall, stupid-faced man who tugged constantly at a drooping, tawny moustache. Forster Gaylord, Steve knew the latter to be, Tri-Flag Syndicate's representative *de luxe*. These two occupied a table far down the room, and Morales' back was toward the door. Beyond them was a vacant table, and the partners threaded their way through the drinkers toward it.

Half-way down the room a waiter spied them and pulled out chairs. They seated themselves, and at that moment Morales saw them. His black eyes fairly bulged; his mouth sagged ludicrously open for full ten seconds, while he sat rigid. His expression proved guilty knowledge, at least, of the knife-throwing, and Steve was satisfied. He made no sign of recognition, passing over the gaping face as if he had not seen.

As the waiter stood expectantly, from a table in a corner a girl came slowly. She wore the traditional short scarlet skirt of the Spanish dancer, with gold-embroidered, short-sleeved, waist-length jacket of black velvet over a blouse of creamy silk. Her stockings and slippers were gold-coloured,

and through the lustrous black coil of her hair she had thrust a single blood-red rose. Imperiously she pushed aside the waiter, and stood, rounded arms akimbo, staring down into the faces of the Americans with appraisal that would have been insolent but for its superb unself-consciousness.

Steve met her eyes calmly. Morg stared in undisguised fascination. In truth, Carlotta Mendoza might have well drawn a second look from any man. It was not so much that she was ravishingly beautiful; there was a suggestion of lawlessness that clung about her like a perfume. It was in the large, brilliant, dark eyes, in the droop of her scornful lids, in the curve of the scarlet mouth—in all the face together. But most of all it was in the poise of her lithe, rounded figure. She carried that tigress-spell so often mentioned, but so seldom seen. This, and impetuous intensity, made the keynote of Carlotta of the Stars.

The waiter had given way swiftly, and she stood staring—her eyes upon Steve after one flashing glance at Morg—until she was quite content. Then she smiled, a humble little lip-curling all the more mocking for its pretence of humility.

"What is the señores' pleasure?" Her low, clear voice made insolent the civil question. It

was as if a monarch had taken a scrubwoman's mop and pretended to be a scrubwoman.

She brought their drinks with an air of exaggerated respect, but flanking the *limonadas* on the tray was a glass of wine. She usurped the vacant chair without a by-your-leave, and clinked her glass upon Steve's.

"To our much better acquaintance!" she smiled flashingly. Steve noted that Morales' face had suddenly darkened; that the stupid-faced Gaylord was blinking owlishly at them.

"I like Americans!" said Carlotta suddenly, clearly enough to be heard at the tables around them. "These boys"—the heavy bracelets jangled barbarically as she indicated the other drinkers with a careless, contemptuous gesture—"are very well in their way. They wear uniforms brighter than a macaw's feathers, and, like other parrots, chatter much and loudly. So they think themselves devils. Sometimes I smile, as if I, too, thought so. But later—I laugh to myself. I like Americans, for I like—men! I should much like to learn to speak the English—if I but had a teacher——"

She eyed Steve slantingly over her glass-rim,

little black head on one side. But Steve was with difficulty keeping a straight face at the effect of Carlotta's words upon Morales. Carlotta frowned. She was not used to being ignored, even for a moment. Imperiously she tugged at Steve's sleeve until he smiled slowly upon her.

"You will be—friends with me?" she demanded.

"You honour me beyond my deserts," replied Steve solemnly. She searched his face for the sarcasm she sensed behind the polite words, then bent swiftly toward him with a hint of anger.

"I am not jesting with you!" she declared earnestly. "I would much like to have you for my—friend; and the friendship of Carlotta of the Stars is not to be touched lightly!"

Then all seriousness vanished. Turning so that she faced Morales squarely, she stared straight through him. She made witty comment upon the men at the tables, sketching their biographies with fluency, point, and perfect disregard for the victim's feelings.

"That," she would say, as if exhibiting an interesting animal, "is Sancho Valdez. A Colonel in the army is Sancho, and in the cafés, or at

the concerts in the Plaza, he is a mighty warrior. But if Flores should go to war, then would Sancho fall ill with great suddenness.''

Her clear voice carried distinctly, and the specimens selected wriggled frantically as they attempted pretence of not hearing, but sent black glances toward the amused Americans. Morales she left alone, after the one dig at his myriad uniforms and bold chattering. But he sat glowering at the trio. Steve wondered idly if the much-adorned little Colonel could be jealous.

''You will come again—very soon?'' she begged, when the partners rose.

''How could we stay away from Carlotta?'' smiled Steve, looking down at her.

''That is not real talk!'' she pouted. Stepping swiftly around the table, she stood close before him, her fingers caught in his lapel. Her hand brushed the bulk of the Colt beneath his shirt. With the contact her brilliant eyes widened, and she made of her mouth a scarlet ''O.'' Then she smiled ravishingly up at him.

''I mean it when I say that I like you very much; that I want you to come again. You will come? Answer me with straight words!''

He nodded, gravely this time, and she rewarded

him with another smile. Suddenly she plucked the rose, that was no redder than her lips, from her hair, jammed its stem through his buttonhole. Steve, staring over her shoulder, saw Morales' face go almost black with congested blood; saw the full lips shrink snarlingly back from white teeth. So he reconsidered his impulse to refuse the flower and let it stay in his lapel.

"A dream!" breathed Morg ecstatically, as they went by quiet, dusky streets back to the hotel. "By Joe! A dream!"

"A dream?" grunted Steve. "Yes! A dam' *bad* one!" He jerked the rose from his lapel and flipped it gutterward.

Chapter IX

"COME TO CARLOTTA OF THE STARS"

"IF we're seen wandering about inside there the whole town will know what we're after," said Steve reflectively, as they stood before the doorway of the ruined house from which the knife had come, pretending occupation in building cigarettes.

"Well, you watch an' I'll take a *pasear* around inside," suggested Morg.

Swiftly he inspected tiny marks on wall, doorway, and dust. He had an almost uncanny genius for trailing, and now he announced his findings in a running monotone.

"Both your bullets went through. No chips on the door-facin'. Both missed, I reckon. They—no, *he*—stood right here an' flipped the bowie as we passed. He'd probably followed us for a while, then cut ahead an' waited. He slung the knife, then hiked. You could drive a team through that hole in the back wall. Two lines o'

tracks, made by the same hairpin. One where he tippy-toed in; 'tother where he left us. No blood; reckon he was ahead o' your bullets alla way. Sloped down the alley here, an'—I reckon he's passin' the far boundary o' Guatemala if he didn't stop.

"Now," he grunted, joining Steve on the sidewalk, "what's to do? Hell's bells! I wish these *gunies*'d come into the open an' start a man-size ruction! This waitin' *their* pleasure is gettin' tiresome. Well, we don't get paid for standin' here. Might's well drift—— What's it, *muchacho?*"

The last was delivered to a fox-faced urchin who had come silently up behind them and now tugged imperiously at Morg's sleeve.

"Señor Lah-hong!" lisped the boy.

"Lawhorn? There's your party." Morg jerked a thumb toward Steve.

The *muchacho* motioned for Steve to stoop, and when his lips were at Steve's ear whispered mysteriously:

"Come to Carlotta of the Stars. She must see you alone—now."

He would say no more, so Steve parted from Morg and followed in the youngster's wake to

the Café of the Stars. It was not an errand to Steve's taste for it required postponement of the call he had promised himself to pay the Mays.

As he entered the long room, and his eyes became accustomed to the dusk of the interior, he made out a dimly-white figure at a table in the rear.

"This way, señor!" called Carlotta, rising to greet him.

Steve moved toward her, and she waited until he had come down the room, then stepped suddenly to meet him, halting almost against him.

"I wondered if you would come—to me!" she breathed, and the touch of her, the shadowy odour of perfume that seemed to envelop her, both were vastly disturbing to a man whose relations with women had been of the slightest—from choice.

"You sent for me?" he countered, and she put her sleek head to one side and eyed him slantingly.

"Yes, but—still I wondered. I *hoped* you would come, because I have something to tell you which I think important, and—because I wanted to see you again."

Steve, staring searchingly down at the luring oval of her face, was also wondering. Morales

had dropped Carlotta to try for Estelle. Now, on which side of the fence was Carlotta? Did she hate Morales in consequence, or was this little play intended, somehow, to aid him? He chose his words carefully before he spoke.

"I was surprised to receive your message," he said gravely. "I have been here but a few days, but even in that time I have heard——" He hesitated, as if unwilling to go on.

"You have heard *what?*" she demanded sharply. "Things of me? Lies! Lies! Lies! Never do these pigs of men tell of Carlotta Mendoza the truth! They come; they sit here and stare at me with the eyes of dying *burros.* I laugh at them, and then—*then* they go away and tell of me lies! *What* have you heard?"

"No doubt it was but a lie," Steve said musingly, "for why should the President's stepson offer to a café-owner's daughter *marriage*——"

"He did!" she interrupted fiercely. "Perhaps you think that Carlotta of the Stars is not fit to be the wife of the President's heir? Well, I say to you that in this very room he went upon his knees and begged me to marry him!"

"Then you belong to him!" said Steve shortly, and whirled about.

But Carlotta snatched at his sleeve with the strength of a man in her slim fingers.

"No! I belong to no man! He asked me to marry him and I laughed, saying, 'Of a certainty!' as I have done with other men. I had no thought of marrying him really. That is all. I am *not* José Morales'."

Steve doubted part of this. An opportunity to become the wife of Gomez' stepson would hardly be flouted by a café-owner's daughter, no matter how beautiful. But it suited his book to have Carlotta think that he believed what she desired him to believe. He came closer.

"But you—love him?" He raised her face, with hand beneath her chin.

"No! No! No! I *hate* him!" Her very vehemence made Steve sure that Morales had jilted her. "He—he has told these lies," she finished somewhat lamely. "I—I like *you!* More than I have ever liked any man. See! Now I have told you that which many men in Apacaz would give all they own, or might steal, to hear me say to them."

She drew herself up to the proudest erectness her slim figure could achieve.

"Carlotta Mendoza, señor, has not the need to

throw herself at men. They come to her feet!"

Steve smiled. This was quite credible, even though her wiles, her vibrant beauty, left him cold. *He* was insulated against the magnetism of her by thought of other things—thought of another woman. But since he wanted very much to hear what it was that Carlotta had to tell him, it would be poor policy to offend her before she had told; seeming insensibility to her physical charms, his instinct warned him, would constitute the insult unforgivable. So he looked down at her in simulated admiration.

"That I can well believe, even though I have known few women. Too, I believe that you do like me, since you wish to tell me something of importance."

"Ah, yes; that!"

She sat down again and motioned him to the chair beside her. One slim hand lay carelessly upon the table very near his own. Steve understood; he covered it with his own. Carlotta smiled covertly.

"Your friend," she said indirectly. "Last night I heard him call your name—*Ste-eve!*" She put a pretty drawl into the word, looking at him seductively. "Ste-eve. I like it much! I

shall call you that. But I have things to tell you!

"Last night, saw you the tall man of the yellow *mustachio,* he who sat with Morales and watched you always, looking ever like the—the *burro* for silliness? You know him? Good! But do you know that it is in his face alone that he is the *burro?* But, yes! Inside his head he is one very sharp man, that Gaylord. He goes up and down the city, looking as if he knew not even his own name, but that is not so. No! He is very good friends with the *aristocratas;* he spends much, much money entertaining Congressmen and government officials. He is not the *tonto*—the fool. No, Ste-eve!

"Gomez has promised to the other *Americano,* Mays—your friend—the great oil-concession. He has vowed that Gaylord shall get nothing. Yet Gaylord believes that *Mays* is to be Señor Empty-Hand! Now, why should he believe that? Morales speaks often—to Gaylord—of the day when Gaylord's company shall get the concession. Why should Morales think that Gomez' will is to be set aside so? But you care nothing for this. It matters not to you if Gomez is balked. But for your own safety——

"Last night Morales came here with Gaylord. They took a table and began to talk, very softly. I wondered what it could be that Morales—whom I hate—had to say to Gaylord, so I went without noise into the back room. See, yonder is a little door which my father keeps locked. It opens upon the back room. I went in there and listened. Their table was against that door, so that they were very near. I could not see into this room through the keyhole, for Gaylord's back was against it, but I could *hear*.

"They spoke most carefully, Ste-eve, twisting their words so that I made little of what they meant. Also, they spoke of things which meant nothing to me. But I heard them speak of Congressmen; of the other *Americano,* Mays; of Gomez; and, of course, of the oil-concession. Gaylord said to Morales that now *all* the Congressmen and many government officials—especially one powerful Minister—were in favour of his company. He said that this great Minister would control the vote of all Congress when it met.

"Then Morales spoke of you, as if *you* had much to do with the concession; with turning it to one side or another. I did not understand that; what has *'El Diablo'* to do with politics here?

But no matter; Morales is very angry with you, Ste-eve. He said—this is what I wished to tell you—that soon would you be *very* sorry for the day that you came here. He said that something most bad was quickly to happen to you!"

Her tense face was but a few inches from Steve's. He smiled at her calmly.

"No more? He said nothing else?"

"Is not that enough? *Nombre de Dios!* Must you know that you die within the hour before you become interested? *Santa Maria! Los Norte Americanos!* Does nothing stir your cold blood?"

Mechanically, Steve brought out Durham and papers. Carlotta took them from him and rolled deft cigarettes for both. His she placed between her lips, then leaned forward for him to take it. But Steve was thinking; he bent absently and took the cigarette. Carlotta, obviously piqued by the coolness with which he had approached her lips, lit both cigarettes poutingly.

Evidently, reflected Steve, Morales had expected the knife-thrower to be dogging the partners at the very moment he sat there with Gaylord. So Carlotta's warning seemed rather belated. It was the other features of her account that inter-

ested him. General warnings seemed quite superfluous, since he had listened to the sinister threats made by Menendez to Gorman.

"Did Morales tell Gaylord why he wanted me to die?"

"No. He but said that he hated you; that he would like to challenge you to a duel. Tell me, if he challenges you, what will you do?"

"Accept, I suppose. But, as challenged party, I choose the weapons. So I'll specify automatic shot guns, loaded with buckshot, across a handkerchief."

"Oh, but, Ste-eve, never was such a duel! With the shotguns! Across a handkerchief! Oh, *Santa Maria!*" She stared at him to see if he were joking, then caught his hand tensely. "I do not think that Morales will dare challenge you after I tell him your way of duelling. But, Ste-eve, can you guard against a knife in the back, a shot from the darkness, poisoned food? So do men die often in Flores, when they have offended —someone!

"Best mount the great white *mula* and ride away swiftly, Ste-eve!"

"'*El Diablo*' to run away from little Morales? No, Carlotta; I'm staying. If my death is to

come, then it will come. But I don't think that I am fated to die that way."

"I did not think that you would run away," she confessed ruefully. "But you will be *very* careful, Ste-eve? More and more I like you; never have I known such a man before, and—and if anything should happen——"

"Surely, I'll be careful," he interrupted smilingly. He rose, and, by way of assurance and farewell, swung her lightly from her feet to shoulder-level. She smiled at him and waited, dark eyes half closed. So he implanted a dabby kiss upon—or round about—the scarlet mouth, then set her down lightly.

"Pardon the interruption," apologized Tommy Harrison very dryly from behind them, "but I'd like some cigarettes—*when* it's convenient."

Carlotta ignored Tommy and stared earnestly up into Steve's face.

"You will remember?" she whispered, standing very close against him. "Watch always Morales, and Gaylord of the donkey-face and mind of the fox?"

"Surely! Thank you for telling me this, Carlotta. Good-bye!"

As he stepped outside her voice came clearly to him:

"Buy your cigarettes at your hotel, little boy. I sell only to gentlemen, and spies are never that!"

Steve grinned ruefully at thought of Tommy Harrison purveying to the foreign colony an account of his flirtation with Carlotta. Well, it could not be helped. He shrugged, and went on toward the American.

Morg looked up from his gun-cleaning as Steve stepped inside No. 15. The lanky puncher was humming, and his face wore a grin twin to that of the cat of the canary fable. Steve sat down and waited, for the symptoms were unmistakable.

"I'm just a pore, simple cowpunch'," whined Morg dolefully. "Ever'body sees I'm an ignoramus an' starts pickin' on me accordin'."

"Meaning?" Steve regarded his partner smilingly.

"Gaylord in p'ticular! Out o' the whole population o' Apacaz—to say nothin' o' the visitors—he cuts *me* out an' fills my innocent mind just cramful o' *terrible* stories, Steve. You'd ought to speak to him about it!"

"I'm thinking"—Steve's face hardened

abruptly—"that I *will* have a word or two to whisper to him in the next hundred years or so. Well, spill it!"

"After you shoved along came Gaylord, pullin' his moustache an' blinkin'. He plumb forced himself on me. Nothin' crude, understand; he did it mighty smooth. Well, almost before I could say 'Scat!' I was facin' him across a table in the Sultana patio. Steve, *I got that bird's number.* I says to myself: 'Mr. Connor, s'pose *you* was a brainy bird, holdin' a job that kept you swappin' cayuses with other wise *hombres,* what'd be a winnin' play?'

"Back comes the answer like a mule-kick: 'Act like a locoed bronk, o' course!' So I twiddled my thumbs an' just waited for him. He fumbled an' hesitated, splittin' up his talks with grunts like a windbroken pack-mule on a long hill. But finally it come out. He passed on a li'l warnin' that there was lots o' unfavourable talk about you circulatin' through the capital. Said that, as a fellow-American an' all, *he* was for you. His advice was to skip, an' that dam' sudden. Didn't know where or how he got this dope. Sort o' soaked it in through his pores, I gathered. But he told me several times that I'd best get you o'

Apacaz *muy pronto*. Wanted to know if I thought you'd go."

"You told him, of course?" Steve knew his partner very well.

"Why, cert'nly! Told him, sorrowful-like, that you was twin-brother to Paloma when it come to bein' persuaded—also as regardin' a kick in your hindlaigs. I kind o' reckon Mr. Forster Gaylord, late o' New York an' suburbs, is wonderin' just how much information he *did* drop a loop over."

"Carlotta told me that his stupidity was only in his face. I think he's just trying to land a dig in our morale; trying to get on our nerves. He's with Menendez, you bet! That's where his interest lies. I fancy this yarn was invented impromptu when he saw you on the street."

"Well," said Morg, "I'll beat you three out o' five at billiards after breakfast. You need some more o' my expert instruction. Besides, billiards always seem soothin' after heavy head-work—like I've been doin' this mornin'."

Chapter X

CENTIPEDES HAVE A THOUSAND LEGS

MORG turned from his solitaire at a low tapping on the door of No. 15. It was nearly ten o'clock, and Steve had disappeared immediately after the evening meal. Morg waited now, still holding suspended the card he had drawn from the deck. The tapping sounded again, more urgently.

Morg slipped off his boots and moved noiselessly to the door, standing to one side of it, for rude persons have been known to shoot through doors, on occasion.

"Who's it?" he called.

"Douse the light!" came a low command. Morg obeyed, and the darkness masked his puzzled face as Steve came in.

"Well?" he queried.

A match flared up behind Steve's cupped hands, illumining his face. With sight of his expression, Morg leaned forward tensely. Then, from out-

side the window, came a muffled *pop,* as if a whip had been snapped a little way off; something smacked against the inner wall. Instantly, both men were flat upon the floor, guns out, crawling toward the open window. Cautiously they peered out, but up- and down-street the Avenida lay quiet in the silvery moonlight. Not a figure moved anywhere. They went back to their cots and pulled them well out of range of the window.

"Shouldn't have struck that match near the window!" grunted Steve. "Well, no use worrying. Friend Sniper is probably blocks away by now."

"If I could just lay hands on one!" gritted Morg. "Just for ten seconds!"

"Maybe we will, later. I've been trailing Gorman. Shadowed him around the block to that little adobe shed in the vacant lot behind the hotel. I figured to catch up with him and scare him stiff. But Morales met him behind the shed, by appointment. I was glad I hadn't alarmed Gorman; the interview was highly interesting.

"Morales is surely under Menendez' thumb. Partly through fear, but mostly because Menendez plays on his vanity; promises him an important position when the Menendez plan works out.

Morales swallows that stuff whole. I learned how Morales comes to be in a gang that opposes his stepfather—something that's been puzzling me. It seems that Morales stumbled upon a part of Menendez' scheme—whatever it is—and Menendez took him in to keep Morales from telling Gomez what he'd overheard. Menendez made Morales believe that Gomez belittles him; promised that *he'd* make Morales a great man.

"To-night Gorman ordered Morales—for Menendez—to let us alone. Quiet!" Morg was snickering delightedly. "*I* nearly laughed at that, too. But there's more. You and I are marked for swift 'elimination.' That knife-artist was the first move; *this*"—he jerked an invisible thumb toward the window, but Morg understood —"was the second. They figure to get us, one way or another. Gorman promised Morales that we'd not live many days. He said that centipedes have a thousand legs; if they miss one kick there will be nine hundred odd others. Oh, they want us, Morg!"

"Which reminds me!" Morg's laughter died suddenly. "Remember the big Indian, Araya? One who wanted to pull Menendez' nose? Well, he's dead!"

"What!" Steve forgot his own injunction to silence. Araya's death was hardly surprising; Steve himself had foretold it. But, hearing of it so patly upon listening to Gorman's coldblooded threats, upon missing death through the window, was disturbing. For a fleeting instant Steve wondered depressedly if Menendez were really as infallible as these events would seem to prove; if he, Steve, had met his master at last. Then his lips tightened. Before the smoke blew away Menendez would know he had fought!

"Happened this mornin'," Morg went on. "Seems Araya rode out to visit a friend livin' north o' town, but never got there. This friend, ridin' toward Apacaz, found Araya's body beside the trail, all hacked to pieces by *machetes*. No clues, police say."

"Of course not! As Minister of War, doesn't Menendez control the police? It's an omen, Morg! It's just as Gorman told Morales. All their plans—whatever they are—are about finished. Now, any idiot might know that they won't stand peacefully and let someone upset the pot. Not much! From now on you and I are scheduled to live a highly interesting life."

"Well," yawned Morg, "what's to do?"

"That's the rub! I don't know. Wait and take things as they come is the only plan I can make. Something may pop up to tip their hand to us."

Morg grinned inwardly as Steve, after an apparently aimless hour of wandering about the streets the next afternoon, brought up at the Mays' gate and turned through it. They found Mays sitting with Morales in the patio, and shortly afterward Estelle joined the men. She was in stiff-starched linen skirt and soft crêpe blouse, the only note of colour about her dress the dim blue of ribbons glinting through the sheer fabric at shoulders and breast. Her dark hair was knotted loosely at the nape of her slim round neck—as three men, at least, observed.

Steve's mouth tightened when Morales' eyes clung to her—and two men noted Steve's expression.

Morales rose with the others, but went forward to bow over her hand.

"Señorita," he explained languishingly, "I have call to say that for a few days I must leave the capital. It is the sad necessity, but it is to inspect a garrison for my stepfather, and I—I

am the soldier! I go without the questioning. But I shall be desolated until I see you again!"

"I wish you a pleasant journey," replied Estelle. Morales waited for her to go on, and was visibly disappointed when she did not. He turned, gained the entrance of the patio, then wheeled to click his heels together and bow again.

"*Hasta la vista!* (Until I see you again!)" he sighed.

The air seemed clearer with his going. There was easy conversation on varied topics. Steve took small part in the talk. He was mulling over the tangled affairs into which he had thrust himself. More than once, remembering that Mays, as his future employer, had equal interest in whatever threatened Gomez' plans, Steve was near to telling Mays all that he knew or suspected. But each time something within him clapped stopper to his tongue.

The hard-headed business man would find it hard to understand such mediæval schemings as Menendez'. If he believed, it would mean a conference with the Dictator, and the vagueness of his knowledge made Steve halt at that prospect. He knew nothing that Menendez could not easily explain, more easily deny *in toto*. Undoubtedly

Gomez' secret agents had wind of some part of what Steve had learned; if Gomez had made no move, what could *he* accomplish by telling?

Besides, Steve was a lone-hand operator by preference. Menendez, he thought, must eventually overlook a loose end. Steve promised himself that he would be prepared to seize it and twist it into a noose for Menendez' neck. Surely Menendez must soon come more into the open in his organizing of the Congressmen.

So Steve kept silence; they turned back to the American without having mentioned the concession or their prospective jobs. Morg's thoughts were evidently upon this feature of the call.

"I could see you a-studyin', old-timer," he remarked. "What's the answer? Are our jobs-to-be in much danger? Just a little while, now, an' we'll be workin'-men."

Steve looked long at Morg before he answered. Then a slow, entirely boyish smile quirked his lip-corners.

"I think she shouldn't ride alone so much. Guess I'll trail along hereafter."

Chapter XI

BESIDE THE TRAIL

IN the four days that followed—four of the happiest of Steve's whole life—there was no move from the Menendezites. Steve's unbuttoned shirt and Morg's lapel-hooked thumb were mere matters of form. Steve smiled genially upon the world, without inquiring if storms logically followed calms. In the cool mornings he rode out with Estelle upon the twisting trails that led through dark stretches of virgin forest upon the mountain-sides. Wilfully he forgot the barrier reared high between him and this girl. He banished thought of the days that must come, when he and Morg would be directing Mays' workmen upon the remote concession lands; when the girl would be in the States—a memory and no more.

At noon of the fourth day they halted at a tiny cabin set in a pocket of red-and-black cliffs beside the rocky trail, where great pines and cedars made the rough-built hut shrink to the semblance

of a doll-house. A yellow cur sniffed inquisitively at their heels as they walked toward the door; from the dusky interior a young Indian woman with baby upon her hip stared stolidly.

When Steve asked for food she set out boiled rice, with *chilis* cooked into it, paste of black beans, fresh cheese, and smoking, foot-wide *tortillas.* They ate at a rude table outside the hut, wooden spoons the only utensils, gourds for dishes.

Then Steve spread the blanket from behind his saddle for Estelle's seat upon the grass and sprawled his long body upon the pine needles near by to make a cigarette.

"What is she stewing in that pot?" demanded Estelle idly, and Steve rolled over to peer through the doorway.

"Green plantains, at a venture. You've eaten *platános?* No? Well, green, they're mighty hard on civilized tummies. Ripe, and fried, they're much like Texan 'pumpkin-yam' sweet potatoes, except for an odd astringency—as if they had been sprinkled with vinegar, as our old negro cook used to make batter for sweet potato pies. Oh, those pies!"

Estelle, watching the play of sunlight upon his

coppery hair, smiled in motherly fashion, as if she were years his senior. In that moment he looked like a great boy.

"I'd almost face all the perils the great and sovereign State of Texas holds over my head to reach one of Mammy Chloe's 'crablanders,' or potato custards," grinned Steve.

"You want to go back—want it tremendously, don't you?" she asked, suddenly sobered.

"I came near saying that I'd cheerfully risk my life. But I've risked that so many times for so much less that the statement would be inadequate. Yes, I'd gladly give everything I own in the world to wipe that charge off the books—the ranch, which has undoubtedly run to seed with nobody looking after it; whatever money's in bank at Saylor City. That alone should be several thousands, for dad kept a heavy drawing-account (he was one of the bank-directors) and I never drew a cent of it."

"It's dreadful to have that hanging over your head. If you could get in touch with a good lawyer he might investigate—put detectives on the case, or—or something."

"I've thought of a thousand schemes," Steve admitted. "Thought of going back under an

assumed name, even, to try to do something. But that reward complicates matters. It has put men on the look-out who wouldn't turn aside to catch the ordinary 'wanted man.' I'm on the Pinkertons' list, and it's their claim that almost every man who skips comes back into their hands. At this distance it would be difficult to impress a reputable lawyer with the justice of my case, and any but the best would be worse than none at all.

"I'm at wits' end, but desperate enough to try almost anything—a trip overland through Mexico and a sneak across the border; something. More than anything in the world—more than ever before—I want back my rightful place in life."

She leaned forward impulsively, the violet eyes pitying, very tender. His back was toward her as he lay watching the trail, a creamy ribbon unwound through aisles between pines and cedars. Her lips had parted to speak, and she might have said almost anything, for, when a trio of Indians filed around a clump of bushes, she was suddenly conscious that she did not know what she had intended to say to this man whose stiff-held head showed so much of misery proudly borne.

Discovery of her nearness to sentiment filled her with something like panic. She rose instantly

and declared herself fit for more riding. Steve saddled the animals and lifted her into the saddle, noting the change in her manner. So they rode away from the cabin, and rather silently let the animals choose their own gait upon the trail.

To Steve, watching her covertly, Estelle seemed half-boy, half-girl. But when, a little later, in the grip of his own musings he had forgotten to look at her, then turned suddenly, he surprised her regarding him steadily, in her grave eyes the thoughtful probing of a woman.

The animals splashed through a shallow mountain-brook, and, coming out, jogged for a mile through a windfall of pines. Steve reined in suddenly and showed her, coiled beside the trail, a fat *toboba*-snake.

"Is it venomous?" she asked, staring with loathing at the moveless reptile.

"About the same as a rattler. The native bitten by one usually dies. Gun handy?"

She drew her little automatic from a habit-pocket.

"Drill him!" grinned Steve, and she took careful aim and pulled trigger.

"Missed!" she cried vexedly. The *toboba* shot out of its coil and darted toward the undergrowth,

with Estelle pumping shots as fast as she could work the automatic. But a racing snake is as elusive a target as a floating bottle; though her bullets kicked dust over the reptile, it would have gained the brush unharmed. Steve's hand flashed inside his shirt and the long Colt—its roar deafening after the snapping report of the little .32—banged twice. The *toboba* stopped suddenly —in three sections that writhed individually.

"Splendid!" cried the girl generously. "If ever you point that gun at me, Mr. Lawhorn, I'll emulate Davy Crockett's coon—I'll just come down!"

Steve cleaned his gun as they jogged on toward the capital. He reloaded it from the cartridges in his *alforja,* gave it a final affectionate polishing, and reholstered it, Estelle watching interestedly. When he wiped his hands and reached for Durham and papers, she hesitated, reddening slightly, and stared straight ahead between the mare's ears.

"You—forgot to button your shirt," she informed him.

Steve shot a keen glance at her pink profile, started to explain, then changed his mind.

"Thank you, so I did," he replied in matter-

of-fact tone, then secured the three buttons usually left idle.

For a half-dozen miles they rode silently, and came, stirrup to stirrup, into the less wild region lying about the capital. On either side of the dusty trail, now assuming the width, if not the smoothness, of a road, were tiny patches of maize, sugar-cane, plantains, bananas, and red-berried coffee. Men and women working in the little fields straightened to watch the pair ride by; sometimes waved greeting.

Steve pulled up finally, Estelle following his example, and dismounted to tighten their cinches. When he had hauled taut the *látigo* on Estelle's saddle he turned to those of his own. As he finished, Estelle clapped spurs to the mare and was gone at a gallop. It was the usual ending to their day's ride—the breakneck race that ended always with Paloma's pink nose just even with the flaring nostrils of the mare.

Steve swung up with a smile. Paloma could overtake any horse he had ever seen in the republics, so he settled himself deliberately in the big Texan hull and let the *mula* gain speed in her own way. Estelle was fifty yards ahead now, out of sight around a curve in the trail. Paloma's

single-foot, while no less smooth, was increasing marvellously in speed in a dozen strides. Then, before they had reached the cedars marking the elbow in the trail, a man jumped into the track, waving frantically.

Steve pulled up Paloma abruptly. The man was no resident of the vicinity; so much was evident at a glance. He wore cheap, European-style clothing, with shoes, and his yellow skin showed no signs of exposure to wind or sun. He was a city-dweller, though farther from the haunts of such than one was usually seen.

"What is it?" snapped Steve. "Why do you leap like an imbecile into the path?"

"I had to halt you, señor!" the man gasped, "even at risk of being trampled."

Steve regarded the puffy features with disfavour. While he delayed here Estelle was getting far ahead. The man glanced up, then down again. There was a vulpine slyness in the shifty black eyes that Steve found anything but pleasing.

"Well, speak!"

"I but get my breath, señor! It is a message."

"A message from whom?"

"From the General, señor; of a truth."

"Name of a name!" Steve exploded. "What general, *tonto?*"

"General Faraday. He says—let me think for an instant—— Ah! I have it now. For a moment I feared I had forgotten. He says—— But who comes yonder on the trail?"

Innocently Steve turned his head. But a swift motion of the man's hand jerked him to consciousness of the ancient wile. He whirled back and saw a revolver come from under the man's coat. Steve snatched at his own gun-butt, forgetting the buttoned shirt that blocked his hand. But, while he clawed at the buttons, his right foot shot up and caught the would-be assassin under the chin. A rustle in the bushes behind him sent his rowels deep into Paloma's flanks; the *mula* hurtled forward in a giant leap as a roar came from the thicket and slugs whined through the air.

Flat along Paloma's neck, Steve finally got out his Colt and emptied it at random into the bushes from which still projected a smoke-tipped gun-barrel. There were shrieks from the bushes, but whether of pain or baffled rage Steve could not tell. He sent Paloma racing down the trail, swung around the bend while clawing at the *alforja* that held his cartridges.

There was a mad drumming of hoofs from ahead, then Estelle jerked her mare to a sliding stop. Steve was dimly conscious that her hat was gone, her hair shaken in soft, dusky masses about her shoulders, her violet eyes blazing. Her face shone paper-white, save for twin scarlet patches upon the cheekbones.

"What is it?" she cried. "What is it?"

"Nothing. Nothing much, that is," he smiled, straightening. His brain began to function again, and the first thought that came to him—after realization that he had never seen her more beautiful—was that this ambuscade marked the end of their rides. The men who had planned this coldblooded attempt at murder would hardly hesitate from fear of killing a woman. But he wished to spare her unnecessary alarm.

"Some idiots were hunting too close to the road," he went on, with a happy inspiration. "They didn't miss us a—hundred feet, and poor old Paloma thought she was at war once more. She got the bit in her teeth and started straight for Panama. Thought she'd be safe across the Canal, I reckon."

He laughed with fair heartiness, but she was looking him over swiftly, as if in search of

wounds, and no trace of a smile loosened her tight-held lips. Suddenly he saw that her automatic was in her right hand.

"Is it loaded?" he asked, and she nodded.

"I loaded it a minute ago, down the trail, before I came back."

"Better put the safety on, then," he suggested. She obeyed mechanically.

Steve had smuggled his Colt into the right-hand saddlebag, shielding his movements from her by Paloma's bulk. He straightened his hat and pushed Paloma up beside the mare. Gently he took the pistol from her hand, dropped it into her habit-pocket, and held the hand in his own for a moment.

"You're the bravest, finest girl I've ever known," he said softly. "Never in all my life will I forget how you came back into the face of danger you couldn't see—to help a friend. No one could have done more."

For an instant they stared deep into each other's eyes, then she snatched away her hand and began twisting up her fallen hair. Farther down the trail Steve leaned from the saddle and scooped up her hat. Then they jogged on toward the capital.

"Reckon I should make a kick to someone about those idiots shooting so near the trail," said Steve at last, when the red-tiled roofs of Apacaz glowed ahead of them. "But—it would probably have no effect, so I suppose I'll end by saying nothing."

"Does that mean that I'm to be—discreet also?" Estelle's voice held an odd inflection that twisted his eyes to her swiftly.

"Why, nothing will be gained by talking, do you think?" was all that he could find by way of reply.

"No-o, I—suppose you're right."

But as they drew rein before her gate she faced him with a shadowy, mischievous smile.

"Good-evening, Mr. Lawhorn," she said mockingly. "I wouldn't have said anything—about those buttons, I mean—if I had understood why you leave your shirt open."

The mare disappeared under the archway in a spurt of gravel, leaving Steve to fumble awkwardly with a shirt-button dangling from a shred of silk.

"She knew I was lying all the time," he muttered helplessly. "She knew. She knew."

He was still grinning foolishly when Paloma turned into the stable-yard of the American and he dismounted.

Chapter XII

"HEART OF MINE!"

MORG CONNOR was an observant young man, but he owned also the precious quality of discretion. So he said very little while Steve ate *comida* in intermittent periods of smiling taciturnity and feverish loquacity. But, no matter how wordily Steve discoursed, there was no mention of the attack of the afternoon. Somehow, he could not bring himself to share with anyone the picture of Estelle, white-faced, starry-eyed, not even with Morg.

Morg sat facing the rear door. Near the end of the meal he frowned suddenly, eyed his companion uncertainly, then scowled at the door again.

"There's that dam' kid from the Stars again!"

Steve turned and saw the foxy-faced *muchacho* who served Carlotta as messenger.

"Say, Steve," began Morg hesitantly, "you're past twenty-one an' you got most o' your growth. I don't like to butt in like a know-it-all, which

Lord knows I ain't. But—Carlotta's plain she-devil; you said it first night we saw her. Sure's death an' taxes, you'll mòsey down there until you meet Mr. Serious Trouble face-to-face!"

"Nonsense! I know what she is and I'm not forgetting it a minute. But she's on the inside so far as politics go, and every so often she bubbles over. She can tell me things I can't find out otherwise."

The boy padded noiselessly over to whisper in Steve's ear.

"Carlotta must see you within the hour! She has something to tell you of the very greatest importance. But come to the alley-door and climb the stair to the second floor. Carlotta says you must not enter the café this night!"

Steve heeded only the first half of the message; his mind was busy with the train of thought Morg's disapproving speech had evoked. It was true that he had carried on a mock-flirtation—which grew more serious, daily, on Carlotta's side—with the fiery daughter of old Mendoza; had learned some details of the movements of the men he watched. Too, he expected to learn more than she had told him thus far, for little that occurred in Apacaz, in Flores, failed eventually to reach

Carlotta. But if he went to her now it meant that he would probably miss seeing Estelle. Yet, if he did not go, Carlotta would regard it as a slap in the face.

Steve swore inwardly. Man-like, he began to regret ever having seen Carlotta. He despised the weakness in him that made him dread Carlotta's enmity; but still, he *did* shrink from having her turn against him. He had enemies enough now. Carlotta was capable of exactly anything while attempting to avenge a fancied insult, at no matter what cost to herself.

"All right," he told the boy, "I'll come. But say to her that I can stay but a moment to-night; I have a—a most important engagement."

He scowled down at his coffee-cup, while Morg watched with patent disapproval.

"You ought to be ashamed o' yourself!" exploded Morg suddenly. Steve coloured hotly, and his lips parted for an angry retort. Then he moved his big shoulders embarrassedly.

"Well, I am," he admitted. "There are some detective-methods I don't fancy, even though they're mines of information. To-night's the last time I pump Carlotta. I feel like a rotter when I go down there and let Carlotta roll her eyes at

me like a dying calf, then turn to decent folk like Mays.''

With memory of Estelle as his standard of comparison, it was not surprising that Carlotta should not receive her dues. Thought of Carlotta nauseated Steve now. He got up and jammed his hat over one eye, went sourly through the hotel to the Avenida.

The café was filling with men, even at this early hour. Steve halted in the doorway for a moment—he had forgotten that Carlotta was to be in the living-quarters overhead—and looked down the room. There were many young army officers, with their civilian friends, at the tables; all were drinking steadily, but with less talk than usual. Then Steve stepped over the threshold.

The moment he stood inside he felt something queerly strained in the atmosphere. Dead silence greeted him; many eyes were raised furtively to the tall figure, then dropped instantly, only to be lifted again in covert glances. Belligerently Steve looked from face to face, standing with thumb hooked in coat-lapel. But, save for these rolling black eyes, there was no move anywhere. Finding no familiar faces, nor any overt threat, Steve walked deliberately down the aisle and

took a chair in a corner, where his back was against a solid wall.

He wondered momentarily where Carlotta could be, then remembered what the boy had said. He gave over his impulse to go and find her; undoubtedly she would come in after a bit.

As he sat there, smoking inscrutably and drawing circles on the table-top with his *limonada*-glass, he felt those curious glances trained upon him. The talk was resumed after a while, but in lower tones. Suddenly it was hushed entirely. Looking quickly about for explanation, Steve saw Carlotta in the rear doorway; her eyes were fixed upon him with something very near horror; the smooth ivory of her cheeks shone curiously pallid; her scarlet underlip was caught between her teeth.

Steve stared absently. Framed in the black rectangle, the girl made a lovely picture. The Spanish dancer's costume was discarded to-night; she wore an ivory satin evening gown, with creamy lace at the loose sleeves and shoulders. It was cut daringly low, and the skirt descended only to her bare, dimpled knees. Her rolled-down stockings were of creamy silk, her pumps of buckskin. There were audible sighs throughout the room as many eyes turned covetously upon

the slim, uncorseted figure. But suddenly she recovered her poise; she smiled brilliantly at Steve, and moved over to his table as if he were merely a chance-met acquaintance. Again Steve felt the myriad eyes upon him.

Carlotta took a chair and at first glanced idly about the room, her expression one of almost *ennui'*d casualness. Her cheeks were flushed now, and Steve, staring without seeming to, saw a throat-pulse hammering madly.

"There are many here to-night," remarked Carlotta, in a clear, level voice that carried to the other tables round about. Then suddenly she lowered her tone until none but Steve could hear; put her hand over her lips as if to pat back a yawn. "You must go instantly! You should not have come! Did not that imbecile boy tell you to come to the alley door?"

"Why, yes, I believe so." Then he whispered also. "Why?"

"A quarrel will be made with you here! One man will face you openly, then a general uproar, and—a knife from behind! *Why* did you not heed my warning?"

Steve's eyes were beginning to glow. He leaned back comfortably, glancing over the men

at the tables near by. He saw beyond these a group of army officers at a big table by the street door with heads together. Here, he fancied, the trouble brewed. He answered Carlotta without removing his eyes from this coterie.

"Why, I reckon I didn't think," he drawled. "Who is this coming?"

"Captain Morazan. A dangerous man; most noted duellist in the army! He——"

The stocky, ape-faced hussar had swayed down the aisle to their table. He reeked of liquor, and his tiny, sullen black eyes were red-veined. He leaned upon their table, ignoring Steve, and stared sullenly down at Carlotta. Steve shot a swift glance at the table Morazan had quitted; the other officers waited, almost rigid.

"*Dulcita mío,*" grunted Morazan, "we ask you to dance for us—to sit at *our* table. Some of my comrades, seeing you sit night after night, never dancing, are saying that no more are you the 'Flower of Flores'; that now are you turned toward—foreigners. *I* do not believe this. Dance for us, Carlotta—for me!"

For an instant Carlotta glared felinely at the bescarred, brutal face. Steve had heard the thick voice, but his eyes were roving. Morazan was

trying to badger the American into a demonstration through Carlotta; while *he* faced Steve, someone else, from behind—— Steve found what he sought. At a table behind Carlotta were three men, in the ordinary garb of middle-class natives, but every one of the trio—as nervously rigid, they seemed, as the officers at Morazan's table—wore a dagger at his belt.

Suddenly Carlotta laughed up coquettishly at Morazan; reached out and patted his hand.

"Captain Morazan is more than my good friend; he is my champion!" she said lightly. "To show my gratitude to him, to-morrow night I shall dance—for his sole pleasure—upon that largest table yonder; dance as even Carlotta of the Stars has never danced! I shall wear—but why speak of little things?—a rose in my hair; two veils; perhaps—*perhaps* only one! Ah, *Capitán mío,* I promise you such a dance as will make your blood race as never *aguardiente* could do! To-night I am—tired."

"To-morrow is not to-night!" persisted Morazan, his little eyes smouldering. "Dance now!"

"I am too tired; I would dance poorly," smiled Carlotta, still desperately striving to stave off

the disaster she sensed. "To-morrow night, *Capitán mío.*"

"I said to-night!" snarled Morazan, and shot out a hand that clutched her shoulder.

As Carlotta jerked backward his clawing fingers tore the flimsy satin from shoulders and breasts. Steve had watched, not only Morazan, but the army officers—who had risen and edged halfway down the room to listen—and the trio at the table behind. Carlotta screamed shrilly, not in fear, but in deadly rage at being so handled. Her nails raked Morazan's face twice, then Steve was upon his feet. As he rose he swung his heavy chair sideways, and it turned in his hand, hurtled through the air.

The uncouth missile caught two of the daggermen as they leaped up and whipped out their weapons. They went down like ten-pins as the chair crashed across their faces, carrying down the third man with them. Without glancing at them, Steve smashed his fist against Morazan's chin, and the captain skated backward into a table, upsetting it. The blow had saved Morazan from worse, for, as Steve struck, so did Carlotta—a lightning upthrust with the stiletto whipped from her torn camisole.

The room was in an uproar. Morazan's companions were leaping forward, tugging at revolvers and sabre-hilts. The greenish war-flame filmed Steve's eyes; his Colt was out, and before that big figure all paused. His reputation for deadly gunplay was known from end to end of the Six Republics and that black muzzle seemed to menace each man individually.

"Who will be the first?" shouted Steve in Spanish, leaping into the aisle before them. "You are many against one, but—you have heard of *'El Diablo'* Lawhorn! So will you, perhaps, believe me when I say that some of you will die before me? Who will be the first?"

They *did* know him, and none there felt himself fit opponent for the soldier of fortune. He waited for an instant, but they stood moveless. Then, with one quick glance behind, where two knifemen lay unconscious and the third had felt a soulful urge to simulate the state, Steve backed toward the rear door, the gun-muzzle moving in a slow arc that covered all the room.

As he disappeared through the opening the spell was broken. Brandishing sabres and revolvers, they sprang toward the door. Then a spit of flame stabbed the darkness of the back room; one

of the big chandeliers that lit the café smashed down upon their heads, the chain that held it severed. They surged backward, and Carlotta, recovering Steve's hat, darted out to him.

Steve was already in the alley, and he took the Stetson from her without words. She seized his arm and hurried him toward the side-street.

"You must go!" she cried tensely. "Away from Apacaz! Out of Flores! Mount that great *mula* to-night and ride fast for Guatemala! Menendez has said that you must die, and smiled as he said it. That is the same as if another man had sworn by all the saints, for he smiles not often, that devil!"

"I'm not going!" Steve assured her grimly. "Here I stay. Menendez can't drive me out unless he uses the whole army for the job—and he daren't do that."

"But I tell you it is *death* to stay, even until to-morrow! You were near to dying on the trail to-day. Two days have they watched you, but always the *Americana* was between you and the rifle-muzzles. Only the saints saved you from Escamilla to-day!"

Steve halted under the trees on the sidewalk-edge to look up and down the quiet street. He

had small fear that any of the crowd in the café would follow him into the darkness. Carlotta clung to his arm, trembling.

"How do you know of this afternoon?" asked Steve curiously.

"Oh, that fool, Rafael Escamilla, is in love with me. He is not like you, Red One with heart of stone! *He* would kneel and place my foot upon his head—if I should let him. Menendez ordered him to see that you died upon the trail. So, when he failed, he feared to return to his master and confess his clumsiness. He came to ask me to fly with him to Guatemala. I laughed, and he told me everything. Then I laughed again and told him he had best go. He leaped upon his horse and galloped like a madman toward the north.

"Rafael's horse is swift, but I think that he will not reach Guatemala. Menendez' arm is long, and for the tool that slips he has nothing but death. Rafael told me, also, of this plan to kill you to-night, to be used if he missed on the trail. Rafael learned that Menendez trusted him not altogether. That is not Menendez' way. He told Rafael that unless you died upon the trail Rafael would himself be killed, but all the time Menendez was making other plans.

"Since you have come safely through these two attacks another blow will be struck soon—one that must *surely* bring about your death. What it is Rafael did not know. He swore to me that he did not, and I believe that he spoke truth. When it will fall none can say—to-morrow, the next day, even to-night. *Quién sabe?* But it will come! And if *it* should fail, why, there will be other plans made. Because I care for you so very much, Ste-eve, I say that you must leave Apacaz now! Ride hard for Guatemala!"

"Suppose I should tell Gomez that Menendez brews trouble for him?" said Steve slowly. "What then?"

"Gomez would not believe!" retorted Carlotta scornfully. "He trusts Menendez not at all, but he does trust his clumsy secret police. He thinks that they see and hear everything. Gomez would only laugh at you, because the police would say—I know each blundering thickhead of them—that you spoke lies. This they would swear to hide their own stupidity. Menendez would say smiling that you had dreamed. No, you could not convince Gomez, Ste-eve, for you could only say, '*I think,*' when he asked for proof—when Menendez demanded it.

"But, if Gomez *should* believe—should imprison Menendez because of his suspicions—then all the aristocrats would rise against the Dictator; perhaps half the army. Gomez knows all this; he dares not touch Menendez. No! You must go, and—and if—if you should ask—— Why, I ride well, Ste-eve!"

"I'm not going!" Steve repeated flatly. A ray of moonlight filtered through the foliage above them, and he saw her face whiten with the pallor of honest fear.

She was a queer mixture of hardihood and timidity; of desperate boldness and equally desperate fearfulness. To one of her superstitious mind, her effervescent temper, such an one as Menendez—cold, implacable, cleaving relentlessly to the line of his planned progress without regard for obstacles—typed almost a formidable evil spirit. Where flaming wrath would not have touched her imagination, Menendez' repressed deadliness chilled Carlotta to panic.

"You *must* go! I tell you that Menendez is a devil! He has but played with you before. Now he is in deadly earnest. Oh, if you but knew of some of the things he has done to men who balked him!"

"I'm grateful for what you've told me," smiled Steve. "I'll be on the watch for that 'sure blow.' But here I stay until my business is finished. Tell me," he demanded suddenly, "when Congress meets how will the Congressmen vote on the great oil-concession? Will Gaylord win then, as he has boasted?"

"It is rumoured that a surprise awaits the Dictator." She shrugged indifferently. "I have heard no more. But what matter? Not ten men in all Flores care which *Americano* gets the concession. This other thing grips my heart; your life is in danger, but you—you think only of *business!*

"You will not go?"

He shook his head, and suddenly she threw her arms about his neck and clung fiercely. As Steve groped for her hands to loosen them, a little group rounded the corner of the café-building, bound for the Plaza. Estelle, with Tommy Harrison, was in the van; Mays and Forster Gaylord walked a few paces behind. Neither Carlotta nor Steve heard them approaching.

Estelle did not at first recognize the dim shapes beneath the tree, but Carlotta's low sobbing startled her as she came abreast the engrossed pair.

"Ste-eve! Ste-eve! *Mi corazón!* (My heart!)" cried Carlotta. Estelle started violently; then, having seen, she hastened on.

Steve, in the grip of a cold wrath that held much of despair, pulled Carlotta's arms down abruptly and strode grimly away through the darkness.

At eleven Morg, coming blithely in from an evening with Faraday, halted in the doorway of No. 15. Steve sat in darkness beside the window, staring fixedly out into the starry sky above the town's roofs. There was that in the set of the silhouetted shoulders that choked the light remark on Morg's lips.

"Somethin' wrong, Steve?" he asked quietly, and Steve replied without turning.

"I played the fool to-night. Estelle saw Carlotta's arms around my neck. Go to bed, old man. You can't do anything."

Chapter XIII

EFFICIENT MANHANDLING

MORG was sympathetically silent as they sat at a gloomy breakfast next morning. When Steve turned toward the barroom afterward, Morg followed only with hesitation. Steve went straight through and out upon the street, and Morg let him go, then sat down to shake his head helplessly.

Steve had no objective. He stalked sombrely upstreet to the Plaza, heedless of all about him. Round and round the sidwalk skirting the Plaza he tramped, his mind busy with a grist of unpleasant thought. He was reaping the effect of the halcyon days with Estelle. As unseeingly he paced the Plaza's circuit, there seemed two sides to his brain. One was busied with attempts to formulate explanations which would show Estelle the truth of his relations with Carlotta, while in the other side was marshalled the array of events since first he had seen her upon the hilltop.

He knew that he valued this girl's good opinion

more, almost, than anything in the world; admitted, also, that he had been working at twenty crazy schemes to bring about restoration to his old place in life, and so give him the right to ask a certain question. Now he had come to the end of dreaming; his rickety castles of Spain had tumbled.

"Seventy-seven kinds of fool I've been!" he told himself aloud. "I never had the ghost of a chance; I was just dreaming with my eyes wide open."

He looked up—into the eyes of Morales, who stood in a path watching the big American intently. The little Colonel was magnificent this morning in black and silver hussar uniform, with glittering sabre-scabbard and pearl-handled revolver.

Steve would have ignored Morales. Sight of him brought home the fact that, even if he had found explanations promising to clear up that scene with Carlotta, there would be small chance of delivering them. Harrison and Morales would always be at Estelle's elbow. The reminder changed some part of his depression to anger. Then Morales stepped out upon the sidewalk, squarely in front of Steve.

"So!" he said threateningly. "You have not heed my advice to go!"

A familiar nervous twitching at the back of his neck warned Steve of red rage rising. He eyed Morales steadily, with lids drooping.

"From the kindest of desires to spare you I have said that you should better go. Only the fool lingers where is certain to come—disaster of the completest!" He seemed to draw confidence from Steve's continued, misleading silence. "I warn you. Go!"

"What will you do if I stay? Fight me that duel with shotguns?" The thickened tone should have warned Morales. Steve's grip upon his temper had slipped; the words had slipped out almost involuntarily. He laughed harshly, and twenty paces away Forster Gaylord, coming along a path through the Plaza at his customary aimless gait, looked up quickly, then stepped into the shelter of a bush and edged nearer, his long face not so vacant as usual.

"Think!" sneered Steve. "If I kill you—and I surely will—you can never become the great figure *they* promise you shall be."

Morales' olive skin went suddenly ashy. He stared, bulging-eyed, as Steve, who was laughing

softly, but with a note that struck Gaylord's ear queerly and made the oil-scout hasten to edge nearer. Morales seemed transfixed with commingling of fury and fear. To his sensitive Latin dignity—as Steve knew—there was no greater affront possible than the mockery he was receiving. Rage mastered even the astonishment born of hearing Steve mention matters he had believed known only to himself, Menendez, and Gorman.

Spasmodically his fingers flexed, went clawing toward revolver-butt. Then he noted the tell-tale bulge under Steve's arm and the hand fell limp at his side.

"I—I will not soil my hands!" he sneered. "It is not for the President's stepson to punish an inferior. I laugh at you, as the Señorita Mays and I have so often laughed together at your boorishness, your ill-bred presumption in approaching your betters!"

"Leave her name out of this! Mention her again and I'll forget myself and break you small. We stand together in that regard. Neither of us has a chance. My record bars me, but I would kill you cheerfully with bare hands if I thought you had a hope. Make up your mind to that,

José Morales; President's stepson or no, she is not for you!"

"Thou insolent *chucho!*" yapped Morales. He jerked out the shiny revolver.

His hand was caught before the muzzle had more than cleared holster-top. He was wiry—strong as a woman is strong. But his wrist was crushed like a child's until the revolver dropped and was kicked out of reach. His free hand was clawing at sabre-hilt when Steve let his dislike for the treacherous little dandy possess him.

Back in the peaceful days at Culver he had been favourite pupil of the ex-champion who served as boxing-instructor—had been called the greatest light-heavyweight in college-circles, good enough to make his mark in professional company. Now, combining hard-learned rough-and-tumble technique with scientific glove-craft, there were few men who could match him outside the squared circle. Years of ascetic life in the open had kept the big body in trim, so it was a methodically-furious fighting-machine that smothered Morales. But Gaylord, gaping from his bush, noted instantly that Steve's hands were always open.

Around and around Morales Steve stepped flashingly, using fingertips, elbows, palm-heel,

open hand. Within thirty seconds Morales was dizzy, half-blinded with trying to evade blows that darted in from every angle at once. Cat-and-mouse play it was, purely. One "pulled" punch, which Steve might have delivered at will, would have settled all. But he was venting now his dislike of Morales. So he snapped his fingers beneath Morales' nose, then smacked hard knuckles against his ribs; pulled his ears, his nose, his hair; punched with finger-end the pit of Morales' stomach, and buffeted him open-handed upon the neck when he doubled agonizedly; repeated the whole performance, with such variations as he could devise.

Morales, fairly crying with rage, because he understood that he was no more than played with, fought back with teeth and nails, but found his clumsy efforts evaded always. There was no opportunity to draw the sabre, and finally, when he ducked away and dashed for the fallen revolver, a flashing thrust with the hard heel of a palm tumbled him head over heels, unconscious. He sprawled, a limp, dishevelled wreck, and Steve eyed him briefly, then turned and went grimly toward the American.

With Steve's departure, Gaylord sauntered

from his shelter and stared down stolidly at the stunned figure. Then, as unconcernedly as if Morales had been a dog, Gaylord stepped over him and moved at his customary slouching stride downstreet, to turn in finally at the Mays' gate. When he came out again, half an hour later, father and daughter possessed an artfully-composed account of a brutal, unprovoked mauling, inflicted by Steve upon Morales—over Estelle.

Howard Mays disbelieved, having an instinctive distrust of Gaylord. But he was too discreet to waste words in trying to bring Estelle to his way of thinking.

Estelle's messenger found Steve sitting dourly in the bar-room. Steve tore open the enevelope and stared down at the single sheet of olive notepaper:

"Mr. Lawhorn,—Please don't come again to our house and don't expect me to recognise you on the street. If you *demand* reasons for this action, they will be found in your morning's employment—and last night's.

"E. M.

"If you expect me to believe those tales of injuries done you, which you rendered so appealingly, you do my intelligence great injustice."

"Well, that's that!" said Steve evenly. "I'd expected it, but reality is worse than expectation, for once."

He was already heartily ashamed of the boy's play in the Plaza. But for cuffing the puny Morales, he would have had nothing to reproach himself for but the use of an indiscreet method of gaining information from Carlotta. Now he had let rage trick him into a position where it was doubtful if he could be of any aid to Mays. Gomez would hardly listen to a man who had publicly manhandled his stepson. There seemed no compensatory feature in the whole situation. Steve clapped his hands for the bartender.

Morg, hurrying in from the street an hour later, with uneasiness writ large upon his face, heaved a vast sigh of relief at sight of Steve motionless at the table. Finding no trace of Steve about the capital, he had feared that his partner's depression had led him into some foolhardy escapade. Now he thought the danger past.

"Well," he grinned cheerfully, "li'l blue devils all gone?"

"Shut your damned mouth!" replied Steve deliberately, raising bloodshot eyes.

Morg stumbled over two empty quart bottles

and a splintered glass, shot a quick glance at Antonio. The fat little bartender raised both hands in a resigned gesture, and Morg was possessed of all he needed to know.

"Play you some pinochle," he proposed, artfully casual of tone, as first step toward getting Steve upstairs and to bed.

"No, I'm goin' for——" Steve knit his brows ponderously. "*What'*m I goin' for? Oh, walk! Tha's it. Keep away! Don't want company. Keep away, damn you!"

Even Morg, who had seen him consume almost unbelievable quantities of liquor on one or two history-making occasions, stared at the steadiness of Steve's feet. Only a certain deliberation in his movements and the set stare of the eyes—the pupils dilated until the whole eye seemed purple-black—betrayed his real condition. He walked deliberately toward the street door, with Morg just behind.

"Don't want you," repeated Steve, pausing in the doorway. "Go by m'self."

But Morg trailed him at a distance of half a block. Square after square they covered, clear to the capital's outskirts, then by another route returned. Passing the *Palacio Blanco*—the

White Palace of Gomez and so the home of Morales also—Steve looked up at the stately pile and laughed harshly. He stumbled slightly on the curb of the next street and swayed a little. Then, bound for luncheon with Gomez, appeared Estelle Mays and her father.

With a single glance at the scornful-eyed girl Morg went grimly after Steve, cursing the ill-fortune that had brought them up in time to see. He overtook the serene figure and slipped an arm through Steve's.

"You dam' fool!" he said savagely. "Come on back to the hotel. You done just about enough for one day!"

"I told you," retorted Steve, enunciating distinctly, "that I didn't want company. Now, you homely, long-legged, officious, would-be dry nurse, get to hell away and let me alone!"

"Listen, Steve," urged Morg soothingly, "let's go back. You ain't in condition to be wanderin' around. Come on, now!"

"My condition's my own affair. Not that I'm *drunk*—as you seem to think. I did have a drink or two, but I'm not drunk. Trot, now, and leave me alone!"

So, against his better judgment—for he re-

alised that Steve's cargo had only shifted, so to say, leaving him capable of physical action, but abnormally reckless of mind—Morg watched broodingly as Steve turned down a cross-street and disappeared. Then he shook his head forebodingly and turned back to the hotel.

Chapter XIV

IN WHICH A CALL IS PAID

THE idea had come as he walked—nothing less than the overmastering impulse to force a showdown with Menendez. In Steve's alcoholised brain this seemed the most natural move in the world, and he was ready to fit action to impulse.

He entered the side door of the Military Academy and climbed a broad stairway to the second floor. At the stairhead was a closed door, with a brass plate announcing the office of the Minister of War. Outside it stood a little infantryman, who made no protest when Steve turned the knob.

Inside, Steve transfixed a dapper young clerk by giving his name. The clerk nodded, his black eyes bulging, and, still nodding, backed across the room to another door. A moment later he emerged and beckoned. A reckless little smile was lifting Steve's lip-corners. In a normal moment he might have been less buoyed-up by pros-

pect of snapping his fingers beneath the august nose of the Minister, but now he felt a pleasant tingling of anticipation. No thought of how this interview might affect his status with Mays came to trouble him.

The walls of the long, high-ceiled room he entered were covered with maps of famous battles, with portraits of great generals of the world. Upon the tiled floor were rich, dark rugs; the furniture was of rosewood. Menendez' broad desk was in a corner, one end of it almost against the inner wall. Just beyond the desk, in the same wall, hung a pair of heavy velvet portières, tight-drawn, with the coat of arms of Flores above them. The Minister's swivel-chair was between the desk and the French window overlooking the street.

Steve's eyes flickered curiously over all the room, marking portières, walls, floor, furniture. He came to the end of Menendez' desk opposite the wall and stood looking down at Menendez, who leaned back in his chair with unreadable expression.

"General Lawhorn?" said Menendez in English. Steve nodded, and for a long moment the two men stared appraisingly at each other.

Steve admitted to himself that, whatever his other characteristics might be, there was no line of weakness in Menendez' heavy, inscrutable face; and the thick body promised great physical strength as well.

Menendez motioned courteously to a chair before the desk, but Steve shook his head.

"I am here to discuss with you the oil-concession Mr. Mays is to be granted at Congress' next session," he said, and Menendez nodded without change of expression. But Steve, whose education in the art of reading men had taught him that few develop the control over their hands that they exercise over their faces, looked down in time to see the Minister's thick fingers close convulsively about the handle of a bronze letter dagger on the desk.

"There seems to be—well, irritation over this concession," Steve continued drawlingly. "In spite of President Gomez' statement that Congress will grant Mays the concession, certain individuals seem to think that the grant won't be made after all."

"But why come to me? Any land or mineral concession is handled by the Minister for the Interior—is a matter between that office, the

President, and Congress. I am for War only.''

''I know. But even the Minister of War is sometimes keenly interested in matters outside his own department. *Sometimes.* I came to say that I'm greatly interested in this matter—in a friendly way. I like Mays; so it would grieve me deeply if he should fail to get his grant.''

He shook his head and sighed. He was hugely enjoying himself, was Steve.

''I'd be as pained as if it were my own loss; so hurt that I'd feel inclined to—well, take steps.''

''Yes? Of what sort, pray?'' Menendez' voice was even, and his raised brows proclaimed polite interest, nothing more. But his knuckles shone white, Steve observed, from his fierce grip upon the paper-cutter.

''Why, any sort that promised to be effective.'' The sadness of Steve's tone was belied, Menendez noted, by the mocking glint of his eyes. ''Being disappointed,'' Steve went on, in the same melancholy tone, ''seriously affects me. Often—when disappointed—I do things I regret—after those who disappoint me are in hospital—or elsewhere.''

Menendez' unwavering jade-green eyes were probing Steve's face.

"Your connection with Mays is—purely altruistic, I presume?"

"Precisely! For sheer friendliness I intend to see that he collects what he's promised. While the connection is all of my making, don't be misled! I regard it just as seriously as if I drew a fat salary for my watchdog services.

"Now, while we're discussing the matter so freely—and, may I say friendlily?—it's apropos to remark that I understand that certain persons would like to see me—removed. More, I know the circumstances which determine the rules of the contest between us. I know that they dare not move officially against me because—well, because of my loose tongue. I'd gabble, surely, and some part of what I'd tell would have effect."

"If you have—information such as you imply why not take it to wherever you conceive it would be received?"

"Now, now, General, you're asking!" Steve met the bluff with reproving grin. "That being your question, you answer it. I have my own methods, my own plans. You must dig out information for yourself—as *I* do. But we digress.

"Because of my loose tongue these irritated players dare not take open steps toward my—

what's the word? Oh, yes! 'Elimination.' Thanks, General—elimination. Even a duel between an army officer and myself might evoke unpleasant questions from Gomez. So all elimination must be *sub rosa*—by tossing knives, ambushes beside the trails, and the like.

"While that procedure makes for a generally uncertain and thoroughly interesting existence, in so far as the eliminatee is concerned, it also evens matters. For the eliminatee is licensed to do as much eliminating as anyone else."

Menendez' eyes had never wavered from his tormentor's face. He still leaned back, moveless, imperturbable. But the clenched hand upon the bronze dagger betrayed the strain by which he preserved inscrutability. Now his eyes flickered to the portières on Steve's left; his hand crept along the desk-edge, where was a row of push-buttons. Steve stared significantly at the creeping hand, and it halted. Then, without removing his narrow watch from Menendez, Steve hooked a thumb in coat-lapel and stepped swiftly to the wall. With his left hand he flung the portières suddenly aside.

Two little infantrymen almost fell forward into the room, their drawn revolvers menacing empty

air, surprise making of their swarthy faces mirth-provoking masks. Steve waved them back.

"*Vámos!*" he snapped, then, as they scurried through the narrow passage behind the portières, he regarded the Minister contemptuously.

"Old stuff!" he drawled. "I expected better of you than that—or *this!*"

He came around to Menendez' side and pressed the end desk-button. The chair before the desk—that which Menendez had offered Steve—dropped through a wooden trap-door cunningly set into the tiles of the floor, together with the rug which had masked the door. Seconds later came the dull crash of the chair striking the bottom of the well-like cavity.

Some of Menendez' self-control left him with revealment of his Borgian traps. A twitching of the thin lips betrayed his rage.

"Oh, I nearly forgot to inquire. How did the Congressmen enjoy the dinner-party last night? I *heard*"—Steve stressed the word in the hope that Menendez might not believe it the whole truth, which it was—"that you and Gaylord banqueted them royally at your residence. No stubborn guests, I trust? Everything arranged—each actor pat in his lines?

"Tell a fella, General," he drawled, moving to half sit upon the desk-end and smile engagingly at Menendez. "Do you think you can put it over? No spoofin'! Do you think you've covered *all* your tracks?" Steve shook his head pityingly. "If you only knew! If you knew what *I* know, what I have up my sleeve——"

Menendez tapped viciously upon the desk, with a flash of set teeth between thin lips, black brows creased, jade-green eyes flaming.

"Remember one thing, Lawhorn!" he said thickly. "Meddlers meet meddlers' fates; *always* meet disaster when they interfere with *me!* You are a braggart, mouthing empty words, so I let you go now. But when I want you to die you *will* die—suddenly and unpleasantly. There is a rope about your neck. When I am ready I shall pull that rope!"

"Surely!" yawned Steve. "I believe that *you* believe all that. That's the worst of being a little tin god in a one-horse country; one gets to overestimating his importance. Too much petty dignity; like *Bimi,* too much ego in your cosmos; that's your trouble, *mi General!* You regard yourself with such ludicrous seriousness. Hurts you to be laughed at, doesn't it? Well, I'm

laughing now. I intend to laugh *last,* also. Mark my prophecy.

"Your plans will fail. Because of *me* they will fail. I'm gunning for you, and before I'm done I'll hang your hide on the fence. Now I'm going to leave you. Best understand that if you, your clerk, or anyone else makes a move before I reach the street, the fireworks will start. You have heard that I seldom miss. *Adiós, mi General!* Laughingly, I leave you to envision failure."

He bowed mockingly to the distorted-faced figure, crossed the room swiftly, and shut the hall door behind him, then ran lightly downstairs to the street. Behind him the great white building lay silent as a tomb. So, satisfied that, for the instant, Menendez bided, Steve walked briskly to the corner and headed for the American.

For the moment the activity had engrossed him. Badgering Menendez had vastly tickled all the small boy in Steve, had burned away his ill-temper. Even mature reflection could discover no fault with his action. He could conceivably make Menendez no more implacable, while it was barely possible that some of his mysterious hints would worry the Minister.

The liquor's effect was gone, and as he walked

Steve suffered the natural reaction to gloominess coming with cold sobriety. He began to think of other things—of the bottles he had drained, of Morg.

"Now, I wonder what I said to him?" he mused contritely. "With two quarts inside me I'm always an unpleasant conversationalist. Hope I didn't hurt the old boy's feelings. Hell! I've been acting like a kid!"

Arturo had not seen the Señor Connor since noon, so Steve went up to No. 15. He left the door unbarred, but set two tin cups from the saddlebags one upon the other against the door. Then he dropped into a troubled sleep.

He was sitting, wide-eyed and alert, almost before the cups ceased clattering. As his eyes found Morg in the doorway he lowered his pistol-muzzle and yawned. Morg regarded him with the sourly-virtuous expression of the man-who-stayed-sober, and Steve grinned shamefacedly.

"Sorry if I was unpleasant this morning, old-timer. Hooch always gets me like that, you know. I mean, it always has in the past."

"Oh!" The monosyllable carried a world of sarcasm. "Figurin' on changin' brands hereafter?"

"Just that! My standard brand hereafter will be non-alcoholic. To-day marked trail's-end, *amigo*. It suddenly dawns upon me that I'm twenty-seven years old. No kidding! I realised awhile ago that I've been forgetting a number of things I should have remembered. Here I am, needing every ounce of the few brains I own, and I act like a kid cowpunch' hitting town on a pay-day."

"Spill it!" grinned Morg, sitting down upon his cot. "I c'n tell by the graveyard tones that you've went an' done somethin' unusual dam' foolish. C'm'on! Tell uncle!"

So Steve told, while Morg listened with soulful grunted oaths. At the end he stared at Steve with a mixture of admiration and affectionate indignation.

"You lucky, *lucky* idiot! Don't you know that by rights you ought to be *dead?*"

"You're right," Steve admitted thoughtfully. "But I located Menendez' weak spot, I think. He lets a chance or two slip him—afraid to grab 'em. I hope devoutly that I'll be granted opportunity to make him thoroughly regretful that I got safely away this morning. But—I'd give a lot to know just what's brewing behind that yellow face.

I've gone over every detail we know, and the answer remains—*x*.

"Well, let's eat. I'm not hungry—I'm starving!"

He was markedly thoughtful during the meal. At last he squinted across at Morg over the coffee-cups.

"Is Johnny Peacock still purser of the *Tillamook?*"

"Was the last time I saw him—two months ago in Barrios," replied Morg, deftly capturing the hot milk-pot from Steve's fingers. "Why?"

"Because the *Tillamook's* due in San Pedro to-morrow. She stays two days, loading bananas. How'd you like to fire the real opening-gun of our war? Ride to San Pedro?"

"Suits me pretty. But——"

"Listen. You sneak out to-night and you'll be in 'Pedro to-morrow noon. It's just fifty miles. I want some dope from the States, and if I cable from here that cablegram will be in Menendez' hands as soon as it's filed for sending. So you'll get Johnny to send a radiogram from the *Tillamook* to the chief of police in New Orleans, asking what record he has of one Leo Gorman, charged with manslaughter, et cetera. See? Put

Johnny's return address on the radio, and ask Johnny to cable you here—as 'Mr. Morgan'—the chief's reply, wording it so that military snoopers in Apacaz, who read the cablegrams for Menendez, won't be able to get the meaning. Understand the lay-out?''

''Sure, but while I'm gone, Steve—I—— Oh, dammit! You're rememberin' what you said up in the room, about layin' off the hooch?''

''You needn't worry, Morg,'' Steve promised quietly. ''Not a drop from me!''

Chapter XV

MARIA OF THE "TOBOBAS"

STEVE reined in Paloma to inspect the back-trail, then stared ahead once more. It was late afternoon of the second day after Morg's departure for San Pedro. Nothing had occurred to occupy Steve in the interval; he found himself possessed of a deep restlessness, a brooding sense of impending events. With hands upon revolver-butts—he was again in trail-clothes—he strained his ears for any sound of pursuit. None coming, he spurred on.

As Paloma rounded a curve in the trail Steve saw before him an old woman, trudging slowly forward. Paloma's hoofs fell silently upon the soft dust, and so they came up behind the ragged figure before she heard them. She skipped nimbly out of the path, and as she faced him Steve straightened abruptly in the saddle.

In each hand the crone grasped a full-grown *toboba*—not by the neck, just below the triangular head, but holding them carelessly by the centre

of the writhing body, so that they had ample play for a death-stroke at her bare arms. She cackled amusedly when Paloma backed hastily at sight of the snakes.

"Why, your *mula* fears my pets, señor!" she grinned.

"Well, *madre mío,*" retorted Steve, "I can't blame her, when I fear also."

"They all fear," she told him, the witch-grin widening upon her swarthy, deep-wrinkled face. "All but old Maria! *She* has the power; she was born at midnight of Lucky Friday, far out in the jungle. The serpents crawled up to play with her as she rolled upon the leaves."

"But do they never strike you, mother?"

"*Sí.* Often. As a puppy nips its master's hands. See?"

She dropped the *tobobas* at her feet, where they coiled slowly and with wicked, swaying heads seemed to await her pleasure. She held up her skinny arms to show in a dozen places the white double-dots of fangs.

"Their venom has no effect upon Maria," she grinned elfinly, "except, sometimes, to make her sleepy for a while."

Steve, thinking her a trifle touched of brain,

fished a silver *peso* from his pocket and tossed it to the ground beside her. When the crone pushed a snake aside to seize the coin, the reptile buried its fangs in her bony claw. She ignored the incident, snatching up the *peso* and hiding it beneath her dingy *mantilla*.

"Now may the grace of God rest upon you!" she mumbled. "You are of the kind of heart. But Maria will not take your alms like a common beggar, giving nothing in return but empty words. Look me in the eyes—*in the eyes,* señor!"

She pushed between the sinister coils to Steve's stirrup, brushing aside the grizzled locks upon her wrinkled forehead. Her eyes were like none that Steve had ever seen in human head. The pupils were pearly-grey, their outline that of a crouching cat. They dilated and contracted rhythmically—with her breathing, he fancied.

"It is the power of foretelling the future that Maria *de las Tobobas* (Maria of the *Tobobas*) holds," she droned, her voice sounding muffled, as if coming from a distance. "For Maria the curtain between the Now and the To-Be rolls back—rolls back—— Sometimes the future shows clearly; sometimes dimly."

Her claw-like fingers encircled Steve's wrist.

"I can see—only a part of what will be your lot, though I see much that is of your past, Esteban, my son!

"Your friend, the tall man who laughs, has been in great danger. He is in danger now, but not so much. You, Esteban! Death stalks beside you, with hand ever outstretched to seize! Beware of a man with scar upon his cheek—a thin man, with blue eyes cold as a *toboba's*. Beware also of *rama muerte*—the green leaf of death!

"I see two women in your life. One of them concerns you but for the moment; the other you love and will always love. I see *her* walking unwittingly into peril. You, seeking to save her, will be in deadly danger. Death moves always about the capital, with finger pointed at you and those you know——"

She dropped his hand, and her head sagged forward. Steve, drawing a long breath, felt oddly chilled, as if a dank, cold breeze had touched him.

"But what holds the future for me, mother?" he asked eagerly, "Do I get those things I most desire, or does the hand of Death truly close upon me?"

"Much of evil, but much of good, I sense for

you," she mumbled. "It is clouded—clouded —I see——"

There was a frantic drumming of hoofs from around the curve ahead. Maria stooped swiftly and snatched her *tobobas* from the ground, was gone like a shadow into the jungle beside the trail. Steve backed Paloma into the undergrowth and jerked both guns. Around the bend came a lathered paint-horse, nostrils flaring scarlet, foam flecking breast and shoulders. Swaying almost to Two-Per-Cent.'s neck was Morg Connor, paper-white of face with reins between his teeth and a Colt in each sagging hand.

Two-Per-Cent. swerved toward his trail-mate and halted, gasping. Steve put Paloma alongside in a bound and caught Morg. He saw that Morg's tattered shirt-front was blood-soaked. Morg's pain-clouded eyes were nearly closed, but he essayed a grin.

"Jumped!" he whispered. "Menendez' killers. Got—two. They're—comin'!"

Steve slipped from the saddle and lowered Morg to the ground. No sound came from the east, and Steve thought that the assassins, demoralized, perhaps, by Morg's fierce resistance, had given up. Fearfully he examined his partner,

finding chest and shoulders and back cut and cross-cut by shallow knife-wounds. But the only serious hurt was a wide puncture of the left forearm, and this Steve bound tightly.

The five miles to Apacaz was a long journey for a man weakened by loss of blood. An idea came; he dug into Morg's saddlebags and brought out a black quart bottle. He could not forbear smiling; trust Morg to have a drop of Scotch for emergencies. Morg opened his eyes as the liquor trickled down his throat.

"Feel better, eh?" grunted Steve. "Don't talk. Take it easy while I scout the back-trail for your friends."

From the eastward curve the San Pedro trail lay visible to the ridge, an eighth-mile distant. Squatting comfortably, Steve cuddled his Winchester and waited. Moments passed, then, with a tight-lipped grin, he ran up his sights and aimed carefully. Four horses had topped the ridge at a gallop. The first two bullets kicked dust at their feet; with the third a man slid head first to the ground; a horse reared and whirled, then crashed down, with the next. For an instant the killers milled, while Steve methodically pumped his carbine. Then two men jerked their beast

about and fled the way they had come, leaving two men and a horse sprawled in the trail.

"*That'll* hold the rats for a while!" opined Steve, and went back to Morg.

Dusk came, then thick darkness that masked their snail's progress toward Apacaz. Many halts were necessary and many jolts of the Scotch, so that it was well past midnight before Steve eased Morg down in the stable-yard of the American. The stable-*mozo* was not to be seen, so Steve unsaddled and stalled the animals, then picked up Morg as if a hundred and seventy-odd pounds made a doll's weight. Half an hour later Dr. Gonzales—a fellow guest—looked up smilingly from his work.

"In a week he will be walking; no serious wounds. He has a magnificent physique."

Steve returned the smile. Old Gonzales was a staunch Gomez-man, and Steve's brief explanation had made an ally of the doctor.

The booming of the post-office clock awakened Steve; he counted six strokes, and wonderingly realized that he had slept nearly sixteen hours, for outside the window was darkness. He got up

and drew the window-curtains, then switched on the light and faced Morg, pillow-propped and apparently quite comfortable.

"I wondered when you'd come to life!" grinned Morg. "*I* been awake an hour, I reckon, but you kept on sawin' wood, so I never waked you."

"How do you feel?"

"Oh, a' right. Shaky, o' course. Say, that was the dam'dest thing ever happened to me! I was bendin' over a creek to get a drink an'—*bang!* It fairly rained scalp-huntin' hairpins. I yanked a gun, but some bird hit my hand—they was all around me—an' down went the Colt. Before I could grab it, or pull another, all the cutlery in Flores was slicin' at me, seemed like. I finally got out my other gat an' drilled two clean-centre, then broke away an' straddled Two-Per-Cent."

"Good thing I went to meet you, maybe. See Johnny Peacock?"

"Yeh. Same old Johnny. Took the words out o' my mouth, as per usual, when I commenced explainin' what we wanted. Say! Soon's I mentioned Gorman, Johnny opened the history-book; seems Gorman's from San Francisco, same's Johnny. Here's the dope!"

The little purser's tale was of the San Fran-

cisco underworld. Five years before Leo Gorman had been an uncrowned king—or a ward-boss of the ancient, unscrupulous variety, dominant figure in the corrupt political ring that controlled the Pacific Coast metropolis. Then Gorman, in a desperate effort to stem a reform-wave that threatened to swamp him, had killed a leader of the reform-party. Caught red-handed, Gorman had been charged with manslaughter and other crimes; released only under immense bonds.

But Gorman's associates dared not let the ward-boss go to trial; Gorman would squeal to save himself. So he had been helped to jump his bonds and escape into Mexico at Tia Juana. San Francisco had heard of him no more. But twenty thousand dollars reward had been offered by the family of the judge Gorman had slain; the authorities were still eager to lay hands on the fugitive.

"So Johnny says," concluded Morg, "that the thing to do is notify the San Francisco authorities. Johnny's sendin' a radio to the District Attorney for us."

"Extradite Gorman, eh?"

"Nope; somethin' quicker. Have Gorman deported! Flores, Johnny says, has a deportation

law same's the United States. If Gorman's sent to New Orleans under guard, Johnny guarantees there'll be San Francisco detectives on the dock a-waitin' for Gorman. They'd stick a year an' live on coconuts an' bananas, Johnny swears, to lay hooks on that twenty thousand reward.''

"Good!'' Steve was considering all angles of the situation. "For this deportation business may take time. Well, you did a good day's work, *amigo mío*—you and Johnny.''

When the waiter had brought up a tray for Morg, Steve went downstairs and made a hearty, if solitary, meal. Morg was asleep when he returned, so in the Plaza Steve sat for an hour, occupied with thoughts which deafened him to the band's shrillest efforts.

He could see now that it was best that Estelle had misunderstood the scene outside the café, the row with Morales. Given another day in her presence and words might have slipped from him which he had no right to utter. But these philosophical decisions satisfied only his brain.

At the entrance of the Plaza, as he turned homeward, he walked almost into the little group—

Howard Mays, puffing at his cigar; Estelle, with a filmy scarf of black lace thrown over head and shoulders in the Spanish fashion, between the worshipping Tommy and the battered Morales, who carried his right arm in a silken sling.

Mays nodded cordially; Tommy Harrison inclined his head the fraction of an inch; Morales glared like a trodden snake. After one flashing, contemptuous glance at the sinister white butts at his hips Estelle looked straight through Steve. But he stared straight into her face, until she met his glance despite herself. In the rays from a street lamp he saw an odd, questioning glint replace the disdain in her eyes; met it steadily; saw it give way to scorn again. Then he was past them. As he went there came sound of the girl's light laughter rising above the deeper tones of the men.

It had needed only the sight of her—with Tommy's shining face, and Morales'—to make Steve's sense of loss active instead of passive. He was in a dangerous mood just then; he would have welcomed such an attack as had been made on Morg; he craved action at any odds—the

longer the better. But the peaceful, fragrant night was empty of overt menace.

Walking burned away his anger; by the time he reached the American's door he had even made a resolve to "carry on" cheerfully; daily to do well whatever his hands found to do. He was too healthy-minded to brood continuously over his troubles, to withdraw himself, like an anchorite retreating into a cell to shield his tender soul from the world's touch. He was even whistling as he stepped into the bar-room for a crème de menthe.

Antonio set out the drink, and Steve lifted the tiny emerald glass to the light. As his eyes passed the bar-mirror he noted the reflection of a figure in a dusky corner of the room. Staring steadily into the mirror, Steve saw the man's face become clear.

Round, unwinking blue eyes were riveted upon Steve; close-set eyes, hard and expressionless as twin turquoises. There was something very familiar about the thin, weather-reddened face, the high cheekbones and pointed chin, the gash-like, reptilian mouth. Then the man shifted position slightly, and a long, white scar gleamed upon the red-brown cheek.

The scar-faced man! Old Maria—whose account of Morg's peril had been true—had warned Steve to be alert against a blue-eyed man with a scar. At the instant the crone's warning returned to him Steve identified the man. He had once seen him pointed out in a Panama City bar.

"Chihuahua" Johnson! Expatriated Arizonan; citizen of no country; desired of none. Professional gunman; killer by instinct; as dangerous always as an angered rattlesnake.

They stared fixedly at each other through the mirror's medium. Steve's hand rested lightly against the Colt on his left side. Johnson's hands were both beneath the table, and Steve was very certain that they gripped gun-butts. The killer's round blue eyes stared unwinkingly. Steve drained his drink and walked through the door leading into the office; "Chihuahua" sat moveless, watching him go.

Faraday and Morg were playing cribbage as if not only their own lives, but the fate of unborn generations, depended upon the outcome. Steve watched them for a moment, then tilted a chair against the wall with back toward them, and folded his arms.

"Say, Steve"—Faraday spoke with suspicious

eye upon Morg's fingers—"I'll bet a round of drinks yo' can't guess whom I saw cross the Plaza this evening."

"Buy the drinks. You saw 'Chihuahua' Johnson," replied Steve, without altering his position.

"How did yo' know? But never mind! What's that hellion doing here? He was raising Cain in Honduras the last I heard of him. Why is he in Apacaz?"

"Ask Menendez—or Stephen Lawhorn. He's imported to abolish me, Bill."

"*The hell!* Would Menendez dare anything so open?"

His question met a harsh laugh from Morg, who was staring down at his bandaged arm. Steve sat moveless, only the slow tap-tap of finger-tips upon biceps betraying thought.

"Menendez? How is he concerned?" demanded Steve at length. "Two *Americans*—both undesirables—stage a six-gun session. One dies—perhaps both. Well, how is that connected with the Minister of War?"

"Hum! Devilishly plausible at that! Ah—any plans, Steve? If—a feeble old man, with one foot in the grave, can assist——"

They laughed at the old dare-devil's characterization of himself.

"Thanks, Bill; but I reckon there's nothing you can do just now."

The cribbage-players went on with their game, while Steve sat silent for a half-hour. Then he got up and hauled his *alforjas* from beneath his cot. Whistling preoccupiedly beneath his breath, he explored the saddlebags until he had produced an oddly-assorted array—a box of cartridges, an unopened sack of Durham, needle and thread, a small file. Steve took out his pocket-knife and fell to work.

First he snipped the strings from the Durham-sack and returned the tobacco to the saddlebag, then picked up the file.

"What's the idee?" frowned Morg, and Steve turned a slow head, still whistling, but audibly now. Morg listened puzzledly to the ancient cowland song, "The Old Chisholm Trail," of which every cowboy for generations has known a few dozen verses. Steve chanted a stanza:

Oh, it's cloudy in the west, a-lookin' like rain,
An' my damned old slicker's in the wagon again.

"Why," said Steve enigmatically, "when she's

cloudy, you never want to forget your slicker, cowpunch'. *I'm* not!

Sam Bass was born in Indiana, it was his native home,
An' at the age of seventeen young Sam began to roam,
He first came to Texas, a cowboy for to be;
A kinder-hearted fella you seldom ever see.

Chapter XVI

THROUGH THE SMOKE

MORG waked with a burning desire to dress and leap head first into all the details of his normal life, only to be squelched by Steve.

"Anyway, I want a drink!" complained Morg, when a glance at Steve's stepfatherly expression made it very plain that he had best remain abed. "I ain't had a drop in two days an' I'm dryer'n hell on a Monday mornin'. Run down an' get me one, will you, Steve? Just a li'l one—about three fingers in a washtub."

"What's all this about drinks?" demanded Bill Faraday from the door.

"He's the forsakenest rumsoak you ever saw," Steve explained whimsically. "If we'd bunked him in the bar-room he'd have stayed abed the rest of his life—or the bartender's."

"Well, being from Kentucky," said Faraday judicially, "perhaps I set too high a value on bourbon as a tonic. He might have one small

snifter, I should say. But—the bar-room is occupied, Steve. 'Chihuahua.' "

Morg swore suddenly and very fervently, making unmistakable motions of rising.

"Lie still!" snapped Steve. "You're not fit to get up. Don't worry, *amigo!* I'd hate to have an ornery snake-in-the-grass like 'Chihuahua' rub out my mark."

"He's chain-lightning on the draw; deadshot with either hand, too," reflected Faraday, to be interrupted by a cavernous groan from the bed. "What about it, Steve?"

Steve rocked slowly on his heels and smiled genially upon his friend.

"Bill, if I should start talking now, Christmas next wouldn't write 'period' to my discourse, so I won't begin. But"—his face hardened flashingly—"Menendez has already slapped both my cheeks; even the Scriptures don't command one to take more than that!"

"Where you goin'?" demanded Morg uneasily, as Steve turned toward the door.

"Down to get that 'one small snifter' for you. Lie still! Sit on his head, Bill! He'll be jerking off those bandages and bleeding to death if he isn't watched."

In spite of his confident bearing in the room Steve had no illusions concerning "Chihuahua" Johnson. It might well be that he, Steve, would afford "Chihuahua" another notch on the deadly .45's, instead of himself letting out the killer's life.

These two, conceded the master exponents in the tropics of a fast-vanishing art, "the quick-draw," had never had occasion to compare their skill. Steve knew himself to be both dazzlingly fast and marvellously accurate, so much so that no man he had ever met could be called his equal. But Faraday had seen both men in action, and Bill had seemed dubious, if not wholly pessimistic.

He stepped inside the bar-room from the patio and immediately saw Johnson, standing at the far end of the bar with back to the street wall, an untouched drink before him. "Chihuahua's" round blue eyes met Steve's in their customary unwinking stare. He neither moved nor spoke when Steve halted midway down the long bar to order.

As Antonio set a bottle upon the bar Steve brought cigarette papers from a shirt-pocket. "Chihuahua" stared unblinkingly for a space, then his thin mouth twisted.

"Hear your partner got all cut up other day," he remarked, the grating voice contemptuous.

"Why, so he did," admitted Steve expressionlessly. "So he did."

"Well, mebbe it'll learn him somethin'."

"Meaning—just what?" Steve's voice was very soft.

"Chihuahua's" thumbs were hooked in crossed cartridge-belts, his elbows turned forward so that the stiffly-opened palms were edgewise against his stomach. He had but to twist his hands the barest fraction of an inch to grip revolver-butts. Steve still held the cigarette paper in his left hand as he stared frostily. With his question his right hand had halted at the shirt-pocket, from which dangled the strings of a Durham-sack.

"*Meanin'* that imitation bad-men hadn't ought to run loose without their guardeens is along to watch 'em," grinned "Chihuahua."

"Why," drawled Steve, without moving, "the same advice might benefit a sneaking, yellow-livered gunman working for Menendez. What d'you get nowadays for a safe job of shooting from behind, '*Coyote*' Johnson?"

"Chihuahua's" palms closed convulsively about

the butts of his revolvers. So rapidly that the movements seemed blurred, the two long guns came out; levelled upon Steve; belched flame.

But Steve's hand, hovering at the dummy tobacco-sack string at his shirt-pocket, had moved a split-second before. An automatic pistol came from the pocket, Steve's thumb shoving down the safety-latch as it came. One of "Chihuahua's" bullets scorched Steve's shoulder; the other went wide, for two steeljackets from the automatic struck the killer's hands in lightning alternation, and the long Colts crashed to the floor.

Not for nothing had Steve practised long hours upon the trail with the wicked little pistol. He pressed the trigger so long as there remained a shell in the automatic, and when the eighth shot had been fired it was very certain that never more would "Chihuahua" Johnson be feared as a gunman. But one of the shots—fired at practically target range—had gone astray. Mercilessly and calculatingly Steve had driven seven bullets into the hands and wrists of Johnson. Now the killer sagged against the bar minus right trigger-finger and left thumb, with the bones of hands and wrists terribly shattered by the mushrooming, dum-dummed steeljackets. Three bullets had grazed

Johnson's abdomen after piercing hand or wrist; otherwise he stood uninjured.

"Hurt, Steve?" bellowed Faraday, entering the front door with a bound, his grey moustache bristling like an angry dog's ruff, twin long-barrelled Lugers levelled on "Chihuahua."

Steve shoved the automatic back into a pocket and shook his head. Morg's drink still stood on the bar. Steve gulped down the liquor, then turned to Faraday.

"I was at the door from the start," explained the old adventurer grimly. "If that snake had got yo'—well, he'd never have got anybody else *this* side o' Jordan River!"

Suddenly Johnson slumped to the floor, with eyes closed and mouth agape.

"He's not dead," said Steve, staring down moodily at the sprawling figure. "Not unless he cashed in from shock. I didn't want to kill him; I shot purely in self-defence. Well, we'd better get a doctor."

"Good riddance if he does die! Hello! What are *you* doing down here, Morg?"

Morg had galloped in, pick-a-back upon a panicky *mozo,* his blue eyes blazing startlingly in

his chalky face. Upon the *mozo's* shrinking shoulder rested Morg's six-gun, the hammer at full-cock beneath Morg's thumb.

"Heard the—shots!" he panted. "Couldn't wait—to see what'd happened. This hairpin—passin' door. Made him—tote me down. Did you—drill him, Steve?" He fainted.

When Morg was again in bed and Johnson removed to his room, with Dr. Gonzales to tend the shattered hands, Steve slumped upon his cot. Faraday stared speculatively.

"I remember," he drawled, with seeming irrelevance, "yo' were always lucky at shooting. Only it used to be with dice."

"Don't think it was luck!" Steve said shakily. Now that all was over he suffered the natural reaction from the tenseness, the uncertainty, of the encounter. "I took no chances with that wolf. Last night I rigged this fake tobacco-sack string to hang from the pocket the automatic was in. Figured 'Chihuahua' might be looking for a sleeve-draw or any of the regular bag of tricks."

"Just the same, that stunt might not have fooled a vet. like 'Chihuahua.' I think I'll stick to my belief that yo' were unusually favoured of

the gods this morning. Well, I'll send up Doc Gonzales to see to Morg as I go down. See yo' some more!''

The excitement of Morg's trip below-stairs brought on a fever. Dr. Gonzales administered a sleeping-powder, and when he had watched Morg relax under the opiate Steve became suddenly conscious of an extreme emptiness. He snapped off the light, locked the door, and went downstairs. As he took his usual seat in the dining-room he noted that a new waiter lounged in the rear doorway. When the man came forward Steve eye him carelessly.

''Where is Rafael? He always waits on this table.''

''Rafael's mother is very ill, señor,'' the new man explained. ''The message came but last night, I hear. I am now the waiter for this table.''

Obviously the new waiter was no adept. He strewed dishes helter-skelter across the cloth, handling them awkwardly.

''*Café?*'' he inquired, when at last he had unloaded the tray. Steve nodded.

The waiter sidled away, and Steve lifted a fried egg to his plate. Then suddenly he leaned back, to stare at the door of the dining-room that led

into the office. A ragged *muchacho* of eight or nine pattered through this door at that moment, evidently headed on a foraging-expedition to the kitchen. Steve beckoned, and the urchin came shyly over. Steve put a silver dime into the grimy little hand, then whispered in the boy's ear. The *muchacho* nodded violently, with much display of white teeth, and scampered back into the office. Steve waited, narrow-eyed and grim of mouth.

"Now, how much of a guesser am I this bright and sunny morning?" he muttered.

Then the boy reappeared, holding the light chain by which Pancho, the scrawny black monkey, was usually tethered to the desk near Arturo. Pancho's wizened face and bird-like chirping alike betrayed irritation at this unusual interruption of his morning nap. Steve took the chain, observing that both Arturo and Dwyer now watched from the office-door.

Pancho, in obedience to a twitch of the chain, scrambled into Morg's chair and eyed Steve beadily. Deliberately Steve held out a bit cut from the egg on his plate. Pancho gulped it, and Steve watched intently as the monkey licked its muzzle.

Then Pancho's darting glances discovered the plate of sliced oranges, and, without waiting for invitation, a slim paw shot out and captured a segment of *naranjo*. It followed the egg, and Steve raised expressionless eyes to the pair in the doorway. Arturo was openly shocked, but Dwyer's broad, pallid face showed mild amusement at Steve's unusual occupation. Then a gasp recalled Steve's attention to the monkey. Pancho had clapped both paws to his pot-belly; his mouth was stretched widely open, as if in a struggle for breath; the beady eyes rolled agonisedly. Then with a shrill, near-human scream the little animal toppled sideway to the floor, writhed for an instant, was rigid.

With only a quick glance at Arturo and Dwyer, Steve sprang up and darted through the rear door. From this entrance a covered gallery led to the dirt-floored outbuilding which was the American's kitchen. In the kitchen door Steve halted, with right hand hooked in cartridge-belt.

Before the long, low, clay-floored bench that served as stove was the usual line of slovenly, barefooted women, and in a corner three waiters lounged beside a young girl. But of the nervous *mozo* who had served Steve there was no sign.

"Where is my waiter?" called Steve grimly. The oldest *mozo* turned with a shrug.

"*Quién sabe,* señor? A few moments ago he went out and crossed the yard to the street. When I called to him, asking where he went, he made no answer."

"Who cooked the meal he brought me?"

"I cooked it, señor." An ancient woman turned from her work before a fire. "Was it not so good as usual?" Steve regarded her searchingly, but the withered face was calm. "I have cooked other meals for you," she told him. "If the señor likes not my cooking—I am sorry."

"Tell me," said Steve, puzzling the matter, "did the new man come to the fire while you cooked?"

"*Sí,* señor!" she nodded placidly. "He watched the eggs cooking and called to me to take them up when they were done. Then he went yonder to the table in the corner, taking the eggs upon his tray, to slice oranges for you."

Steve turned, whistling thoughtfully, and faced Dwyer and Arturo. The landlord stood in the kitchen door with Arturo slightly behind him.

"Who was your new waiter?" drawled Steve.

"New waiter?" repeated Dwyer, staring.

"Why, I don't know. Arturo hired him yesterday when Rafael turned up with a sick-mother yarn. I told Arturo to get someone. Who was he, Arturo?" he concluded in Spanish.

"I do not know him, señores," denied the clerk, "except that he told me his name was Miguel Espinosa; that he was from Nicaragua and had worked in the dining-room of the Gran Hotel de Lupone in Managua. He said that he was a good waiter. What has he done?"

Steve probed Arturo's innocent face, then turned back to Dwyer.

"He was neither Nicaraguan nor waiter," he said dryly. "His accent was Floreño and his waiting damnably clumsy. *Mamá* Lupone would lift the scalp from such a waiter. No, he was planted here. What has he done, Arturo? Nothing—except slip a dose of *rama muerte*—death leaf—into my breakfast."

"Death leaf!" gasped Dwyer. "Why—why—it couldn't be! Why——"

"Nevertheless it was! You saw Pancho die? Well, I don't think that he cashed in from a secret sorrow or a broken heart. Rather fortunate that I put two and two together, having been forewarned that something like this might be tried."

"Why, the saddle-coloured hound!" snarled Dwyer. "Comin' into *my* place to pull a stunt like that! Oh, but I'd love to lay hands on him for a minute! I'd make him hard to find! Say, I'm sure sorry about this, Mr. Lawhorn! Honest! But—what'd he want to poison *you* for?" Dwyer's little eyes were undeniably curious.

"Oh, I reckon he figured he had reason enough—his pay-cheque'd furnish that. Never mind. Perhaps I'll cut his trail one day. If I do I'll make a question-mark of that long neck of his. Now I want my breakfast, and I'm going to watch it cooked this time."

Dwyer remained in the kitchen, furiously cursing Miguel, the vanished one.

"Why, if this gets out," he lamented, "I might's well shut up the dinin'-room! Who'd eat in a place where they might be poisoned any minute?"

"Well," grinned Steve, who was busied with his own reflections, "I'm not going to proclaim it from a soap-box, Dwyer."

"Say, that's good o' you, Mr. Lawhorn! I sure appreciate it."

After the meal, for the space required to roll and smoke five cigarettes very deliberately Steve

remained at the table. Dwyer came in as he was rising, to say that another monkey would be brought in from the country that afternoon for Steve's especial use.

"You can take him to table an' feed him a bite o' ever'thing," beamed Dwyer.

"Thanks! I'll appreciate that monkey's company more than that of most men," Steve smiled. "Adulterated food is my particular abomination. See you later."

He escaped from the gratefully voluble Irishman with difficulty and stepped outside. Upon the side walk he hesitated for a moment, then turned and sauntered with appearance of aimlessness up the Avenida Nacional toward Central Plaza.

Chapter XVII

GAYLORD—STRATEGIST

THERE was one man in whom Forster Gaylord reposed more confidence than any other; one man whom he considered a trifle shrewder, in any sort of business deal, than the next. This particular man was Forster Gaylord.

The tall, stupid-faced oil-scout was not pleased these days. It was coming to him that he was being used. Nothing is more unpleasant to the man who is accustomed to using others than to find himself a tool.

Gaylord had come to Apacaz with orders from Tri-Flag's head which were simple but quite definite—all-embracing.

"If the lands are as rich and extensive as reported—*get that concession!*"

His expense-account was unlimited; Tri-Flag played no pikers' hand. So long as results justified them Gaylord's expenditures would be passed without comment. So, after a month of

careful investigation, Gaylord had approached Menendez, whom he knew to be bankrupt.

He had made a plain offer—a quarter-million in cash on the day that Tri-Flag landed the concession. Menendez had merely nodded acceptance; had promised briefly to remove Mays from the field, for all that Gomez could do. But he had said nothing since, if one excepted vague assurances that all went as smoothly as might be expected. This silence irritated Gaylord. The New Yorker was not accustomed to having his carefully-prepared proposals meet blank indifference—as Menendez met them.

The oil-scout knew that Menendez considered these swaggering Texans stumbling-blocks in his schemes, even though Gaylord knew nothing of the schemes. Superciliously, Gaylord had watched the attempts to eliminate Steve and Morg. He prided himself on his shrewdness, his hard-headed common-sense. Dime novel methods were ridiculous, had no place in modern business. Menendez' mediæval attacks upon the Texans' lives were ridiculous, Gaylord told himself. But, believing that every man thinks much of his own profit, much of the soundness of his own skin. above all, has his cash-price for committing any

crime, Gaylord had conveyed vague threats to Morg, believing they might prove effective. But he admitted now that he had erred; these *Diamond Dicks* had not become alarmed. Well, then, it was time to use the efficient Gaylord brain in earnest.

These men were to be removed before the day that Congress met—to grant Tri-Flag the concession. Since Menendez seemed powerless to turn the trick, direct modern methods might succeed. Gaylord was sure they would.

By the very persistence of the attacks upon him, Steve had attained immunity from worry. But he found it hard to sit quiet; he spent hours in wandering aimlessly about the capital, studying the faces he encountered, listening to scraps of conversation in the hotel patios, in the drinking-places respectable and questionable.

He stepped out of the *Boca del Toro cantina* after a single *limonada* at the rough bar—crowded with natives of lower-middle and lower classes—and nearly trod upon Gaylord's toes. The oil-scout blinked at him vacuously for an instant, then nodded.

"Uh—afternoon," he grunted. "Looking over the—uh—sights?"

Steve nodded, from beneath his hat-brim studying the stupid-seeming face.

"I've—uh—been doing the same," said Gaylord. "But—had about enough. Drink?"

Steve shook his head, but reconsidered his impulse to move on alone. Perhaps Gaylord had the answer to certain questions which he perpetually revolved these days. He leaned against the building wall and made a careful cigarette, while Gaylord tugged at his drooping, tawny moustache and blinked vacantly.

"Uh—Lawhorn, I'd like to put a proposition to you." Gaylord broke silence suddenly.

"Shoot!" Steve began to understand the other's presence there, so pat with his own.

"It's an—uh—offer of jobs for yourself and Connor."

"Here in Flores?" (Steve knew they would not be.)

"No. In—uh—Brazil. My company is doing development work there. Need bosses such as you chaps. Pay is—uh—two-fifty a month, gold. Transportation to Rio from Puerto Naranjo.

High pay, but—think you're worth it. Right men are hard to get."

Steve admired Gaylord's artistry. The oil-man had said just enough to explain his offer, without making the common error of over-compliment. Each fencer was guilty of a misthrust; Gaylord had no idea that Steve suspected his connection with Menendez, while Steve believed this offer—made for the sole purpose of getting them out of Apacaz—Menendez' idea. But there was more he wanted to know.

"Well, we've been considering other jobs," he replied hesitantly. "They may pay a good deal more, and it's at something we both know well. When would we leave?"

"Day or two," said Gaylord, inwardly triumphant. "For the coast, that is. Y'see, some of our uh—work down there is—uh—river-work. Want you to—uh—hire some boatmen in Naranjo. They'd go down with you. Takes time to—uh—persuade those boatmen fellows!"

From the encyclopædic information in his brain Steve drew two items. No steamer would leave Naranjo for Panama until March fifth. This was February twenty-third. Also if Tri-Flag

needed boatmen, these could easily be hired in Brazil. No, Steve decided, all this was merely part of the plan.

"Afraid we couldn't leave so suddenly," he remarked slowly. "The offer is—interesting; I don't like to pass it up. But"—he stared in pretended embarrassment at his boot-toes—"I've a little—well, affair here which couldn't be settled so quickly. A girl who—lives among the stars——" He broke off, counterfeiting a sheepish grin. Gaylord smiled. He thought he understood. Carlotta.

"Besides," Steve went on, "I'd like to see the big centennial pageant in honour of Flores' independence. That's the twenty-eighth. Could you make our leaving day March first?"

"Afraid not," said Gaylord regretfully, after a keen, veiled glance at the Texan. "Persuading these boatmen to leave takes time. Might make it—uh—morning of the twenty-sixth. How would that be?"

It was illuminating, Steve thought. If it were important to remove them before Menendez' coup came, surely Gaylord would not have agreed to their staying in Apacaz until the twenty-sixth—*if* anything were scheduled to break before that

day, or on it. Menendez had told Gorman, in the mountain inn, that *before* the day that Congress met "something" would occur to give Gaylord the concession. Well, then! Between the twenty-sixth and the first—two days—Menendez must show his hand. So Steve smiled pleasantly upon Gaylord.

"If my little—affair can be settled in time, I'll let you know our decision. I can't give a definite answer now, but I'll tell you as quickly as possible. *Adiós!*"

Steve strode away without giving Gaylord time to speak. He turned the next corner and dived into the entrance of the market-place, then turned, sheltered from view from the street. Sure enough, Gaylord had followed as far as the corner; stood staring. With a grin, Steve went on past the stalls that housed myriad dealers of the market. He halted finally before a saddler's booth and began idle inspection of leather goods.

He had stepped inside to examine an ornate saddle when a footstep behind him made him turn quickly. His nerves were tense these days. With an effort he kept his face inscrutable as he met level, violet eyes. Calmly Estelle came toward him; over her shoulder he saw the *mozo*

of the Mays' stable lounging in the doorway. Steve waited for her to speak, when she faced him nearly. He was wondering.

"Mr. Lawhorn," she said abruptly, "do you intend to leave Apacaz soon?"

"Why, that depends upon what you mean by 'soon,' " replied Steve indifferently, for the calm, patronizing tone waked a devil of perversity in him. It was bad enough to have her consider him a brutal killer, a liar, and a philanderer; this he could endure because she had some ground for the belief. But this treatment of him, as if he were something far beneath her, waked honest anger.

"How soon?" she asked, in the same superior tone. One dark brow arched interrogatively as she inspected him in that aloof, impersonal fashion.

"Why, whenever I feel inclined to leave!" he told her grimly. "Is that all you want to know? If so, good-morning!" Glowering down at her, Steve felt an almost overwhelming impulse to shake her until the teeth rattled in her patronizing little head. But equally strong was the conflicting—perhaps kin—emotion that urged him to snatch her up and cover the scornful red mouth with kisses. Both impulses he mastered.

"I'm sorry I said it in just that way. But that's exactly the way I felt—feel—about it, and —well, a *gunman* isn't expected to have great store of manners. One goes to—colonels and the like for politeness." Steve's tone was openly contemptuous.

"Colonel Morales would never have been guilty of such an outburst," she agreed icily, "any more than he would brutally beat a smaller man, or shoot an inoffensive stranger during a drunken bar-room brawl. But all that is beside the point.

"I have learned something which concerns you. While it seems very important, my information is so vague that I prefer not to repeat it, if you intend to leave Apacaz before, say, day after to-morrow."

"Well, I'm *not* leaving before that time."

"But—but don't you realize that your very life is in danger here? That you have offended men in Apacaz who won't hesitate to employ *any* means to—to put you out of the way?" For the first time emotion shook her even voice. Steve stared amazedly at her.

"Good Lord!" he breathed reverently.

"It's the truth!" she assured him earnestly, not realizing that he had exclaimed upon her inno-

cence instead of being alarmed by her warning.

"Well, perhaps you're right," he drawled. "Ye-es, I fancy you *are* right. But what of it? A gunman, as you may have heard, is rather hardened against danger. My time in Flores thus far, even, hasn't been wholly uneventful."

Suddenly her scarlet mouth tightened; she met his eyes with face disdainfully calm, as if forced to give explanations to which he had no real right.

"I don't want anything to happen to you here, because I feel responsible in a degree for your presence. There is to be an effort made—I don't know of what sort—to—to—on the day of the pageant—to——"

"'Eliminate' me," Steve supplied politely. She nodded energetically.

"So much Dolores heard. Your enemies—you must know their identity—intend to take advantage of the confusion during the celebration to——"

"I see!" he nodded. "Well, perhaps I *do* know of these enemies—how I made them."

"With so many troops in the capital, so many wandering strangers from everywhere, *accidents* can happen with apparent naturalness. *Can't* you understand? They—they'll murder you in

some underhand way! You've made bitter, bitter enemies; they'll draw the line at nothing. I —I know your time in Flores has not been uneventful, as you said."

She paused breathlessly; her eyes searched his face with painful intentness. Once or twice, in the days following his affair with Morales at the Plaza, she had caught in Steve's eyes, as they met hers, an expression that puzzled her, troubled her more than she would admit even to herself; somehow, she felt almost guilty. But always came memory of him in the darkness, with Carlotta's arms about his neck, Carlotta's impassioned "Heart of mine!" to harden her against him.

The hammering of Morales she could have forgiven him, for his hard life had naturally hardened him. But to ride with her day after day, then to turn to such a creature as the café-dancer by night—*that* was more than any girl of pride could endure. Too, Gaylord had said that Steve discussed her with Morales as if she, no less than Carlotta, were his property.

"Why did you fight with Colonel Morales?" she demanded suddenly, then was aghast at the sound of her own words. The question had been in her mind for days, but she had not intended asking.

Steve's face set inscrutably, and she knew that he would not explain.

"Oh, he had some ideas I didn't endorse." Steve's tone was airy. "So I roughed him a bit to mark my disapproval.

"But about the other. It's partly because these—enemies make so many threats that I won't leave. But, if anything should happen, you're not affected in any way. I stay on my own account. A bad *hombre* like me, with a reputation to maintain, can't afford to run. No-o, I'll be here for perhaps a week after the pageant-day.

"Now, Miss Mays, perhaps there are some features of this celebration which you haven't considered. There *will* be wild troops in Apacaz, some hardly more than savages. The riff-raff of Flores, of Central America, will throng here, ripe for devilment, looking for anything they can grab. There will undoubtedly be brawling between drunken soldiery and equally drunken townspeople.

"If your father were here I'd tell him this; but I hope you'll listen, and believe that I speak with kindly intent and from experience when I say that it will be much better for you to stay off the

streets on pageant-day. You needn't miss anything; when the speeches are made, the ideal listening-place will be one of the balconies of the *Palacio Blanco*. You'll hear the orators and see the ceremonies, yet if a panic or the like occurs, you'll not be in danger of getting trampled. Will you remember this?"

"Our arrangements for that day are already made," she said coolly. "It is *your* affairs which are under discussion. I wish you'd consent to leave. I can't help feeling in part responsible."

"Why, it's kind of you to warn me, and I appreciate it, but you're *not* responsible. I wouldn't think of leaving now for—anything. Good-morning!"

But at the door of the booth he halted beside the waiting *mozo* to stare at her thoughtfully.

"Your trip to Flores has given you a glimpse of life in the raw," he remarked slowly. "I think I'll leave a thought or two with you regarding those men who live that sort of life.

"That morning at the Plaza, Morales' gun was out when I stood empty-handed. *He* had only one thought—to kill me. It would have been much less bother just to shoot him, yet I merely cuffed him a bit open-handed.

"'The 'inoffensive stranger,' 'Chihuahua' Johnson, whose 'drunken bar-room brawl' with me you mentioned, was imported by these enemies *you've* just learned of. He was to receive two thousand dollars the day I died—protected against prosecution, also. Before our encounter 'Chihuahua' was called the deadliest gunman in Central America. My best friends hardly conceded me a chance for my life when he was set gunning for me. Yet I risked my life at point-blank range; used eight shots to cripple him for life, when one bullet would have killed him. You may find these points interesting!'"

She stepped impulsively forward with a troubled expression, her lips parted as if to speak. But Steve had disappeared in the crowd. He went through the rear door of the market and came out upon the Avenida Nacional, where the sidewalks were crowded with citizenry watching an infantry column march past. Steve halted to watch also.

These were different men from the troops he had seen gathering all week. They were brawny, pure-blood Indians from the wild, remote fastnesses of the northern mountains; some two thousand of them; not so well drilled as their

comrades-in-arms of the central and southern *departamentos,* but war-like figures withal; tall, broad-shouldered, with fierce, swarthy faces. They carried the usual long Mausers which Germany has unloaded upon every banana republic, but the bayonet was replaced by their favourite weapon, the wicked, three-feet-long *machete.* The brilliant-hued, hand-woven blankets thrown carelessly over their shoulders made the ranks very colourful.

As he watched the regular rise and fall of broad, sandalled feet, for perhaps the thousandth time Steve thought of Menendez' plan. He had no doubt that it would be a Machiavellian scheme, carefully plotted to the tiniest detail, and—unless something gave it away prematurely—skilfully executed. Undoubtedly he and Morg had places in it.

It was hard to believe that Menendez worked only to turn an oil-concession—even one worth millions—from one man to another. The planning loomed too elaborate for no more than that. Something else was in the wind; something that would indeed block Mays' concession, but only as a side-issue. Menendez was a man who envisioned great stakes. Steve shook his head

gloomily. There remained only a few days until Congress met. Menendez must fulfil his boast before that time—unless he was even bigger than Steve believed him; big enough to wait, then drive home his blow a little later.

By this time Steve had practically lost sight of the desirability of the promised position with Mays. He did not think that Mays considered him undesirable, even in the face of past events. But—Steve was beginning to believe that he could not bear to be so near a violet-eyed girl who now scorned him utterly. There was growing in him a craving to put miles and yet more miles between him and this, the scene of his fall from Estelle's good opinion.

He was watching the big soldiers broodingly when a shrill yell jerked him from his reverie. Suddenly he realised that he had been hearing, all the while, an undertone of unfavourable comment from the men and women standing about him.

"*Los Indios! Los Indios malo! Los Indios diablos!* (Indian devils!)," the crowd was shouting, with other more pointed descriptive matter.

Here was more material for building reflection. Steve knew that those Floreños with a spoonful

of Spanish blood in them were contemptuous of the Indians, just as the Indians scorned the mixed breeds, the *Criollos*. But usually it was an apathetic emotion on either side. This demonstration seemed different. It gave Steve more to mull over as he turned toward the American. *Who* had been stirring up this racial hatred? Why?

In the bar-room Morg and Faraday greeted him with broad smiles.

"No more bed for me!" Morg announced flatly. "I devilled Bill till he helped me downstairs. I'm so *sick* o' that room that I figure to sleep down here on a billiard-table."

Faraday left shortly, for he had many duties these busy days, when all the capital was in a turmoil of preparation. Morg rolled a cigarette on his thigh, one-handed, in the Mexican fashion, and looked shrewdly at Steve's sombre face.

"You ain't lookin' none too chipper these days, *amigo*. Somethin' slip?"

"I'm just perpetually wondering what's to happen. Menendez' time grows short. Pageant's the twenty-eighth; Congress meets next day. Something *must* pop soon! Well, we'll see it through, Morg; then what d'you say to drift-

ing? Suit you to turn down the job with Mays?''

''Sure! Anything you say.'' Morg was regarding Steve keenly. ''But—I'm dam' sorry, Steve, about—oh! everything, I guess, beginnin' with the raw deal back home. Only for that——''

He dug hastily into a shirt-pocket and flipped a folded yellow paper to Steve, who caught and opened it. While the cablegram addressed to ''Mr. Morgan,'' had doubtless proved distressingly unintelligible to Menendez' creatures, Johnny Peacock's characteristic speech was plain enough for the partners:

''Speaking of shoes and ships and sealing wax told you D. A. would listen.—JOHNNY.''

So the San Francisco District Attorney had moved promptly! That meant detectives on New Orleans dock waiting with grim patience for Leo Gorman.

''When'll you fix up the deportation business?''

''Can't say,'' shrugged Steve. ''But—Gorman's a gone coon, you bet!''

Chapter XVIII

PAGEANT DAY

STEVE rolled suddenly over and lay listening tensely. The frantic, *motif*-less clanging of church-bells blended with a terrific clamour of drums and bugles from the *cuartel*—the military headquarters—near the Plaza. Then came the dull booming of artillery. It was Friday dawning; Flores the Republic waked to celebrate her birthday.

The holiday atmosphere was in the crowded dining-room when the partners went down to *desayuno,* the morning meal. Steve was sombrely silent. This was the day of days; the only thing which could possibly surprise him, he thought grimly, would be uneventfulness, and he did not expect to be surprised in that way.

"By Joe!" grinned Morg, in whom the *fiesta* spirit had waked a devil of restlessness. "I feel like a ten-year-old on circus mornin'. Remember circus-day in Saylor, when we was kids?"

"Just as a hint," Steve retorted dryly, turning

a coldly-suspicious eye upon Morg. "I'll warn you that if you're *very* careful it may stick with you—that feeling. Just you buck off the notion that you're going to scramble through the crowds on the streets to-day. You crazy Comanche! Want to get that game-arm on the hummer again?

"Now, I have to wander around town after a bit, but I won't stir a step unless you promise to stay on the sidewalk in front of the hotel, or, better still, inside!"

"'A' right, gran'ma! *A'* right! Hike when you're ready. I won't go no farther'n the corner, you blame' *crêpe*-hanger!"

The streets were already packed with townspeople in gala-clothing when Steve stepped outside. On every house was displayed the national flag, the blue eagle on a white field. Bunting arched every street, festooned the government buildings. Troops had been arriving for a week from outlying *comandancias,* for by Gomez' order there would be extensive manœuvres. Faraday's "hellcats" were groomed and drilled; polished like blue glass were their vicious Colt machine-guns. The dashing hussars of the President's Guard were waiting to show what proper cavalry was like.

In the *Campo del Marte* opposite the Military Academy soldiers were massing for the parade scheduled to start at ten o'clock. The Field of War was blanketed with men-at-arms in all the uniforms of Flores' army. Three regiments of cavalry were drawn up, ready to lead the procession, while in red-capped blue ranks behind them were infantry-men—short, yellow-faced *peóns* of the central and southern *departamentos* in Zouave-style dungaree uniforms, for the most part, with only one regiment of the brawny, hook-nosed Indians from the northern mountains. Two bands played madly between infantry and the half-regiment of artillery drawn up beside three-inch field pieces.

Steve inspected them from all sides with soldierly eye, walking the circuit of the *Campo*. Then he turned uptown, and around the line of Federal buildings discovered the mountain-troops he had missed on the Field of War. The Indians were drawn up in a single rank which encircled the four square blocks of Government buildings. Around the *Palacio Blanco* of Gomez—and within the line of Indians—was another cordon, this one of Faraday's machine-gunners with their wicked Colt guns. Steve turned back and went down a

side-street. He had seen all that he cared to see, but still all was not clear.

By eleven o'clock, the parade being over, the Calle Grande before the *Palacio Blanco* was a solid mass of spectators. The long lines of fierce-faced, moveless Indians, leaning upon their long rifles, separated the townsfolk from the palace front, but they jammed the street and crowded every spot about the great white building. Faraday's "hellcats" now guarded only the sides and rear of the palace. To the right of the broad front portico, between Indians and steps, the President's Guard sat restive black horses in column of platoons.

Through the wide doorway of the palace came President Gomez, a brawny, hook-nosed, chocolate-brown man in frock coat and grey trousers. He was bareheaded, like the Cabinet members walking behind and beside him. The officials fell back a pace, and the Dictator, his fierce features unreadable, walked to the edge of the portico at the head of the steps. So he stood for an instant, looking out over the people.

There was none of the usual effervescent uproar of Latin American crowds. A deathly hush

rested upon all that mosaic of tense brown faces that paved the Calle Grande. The Indian soldiers lifted beady eyes and stared stolidly at this man, whom they considered their chieftain by blood as well as political position, a man of their own grim Mayan strain. But they made no sign, and the packed humanity behind them seemed gripped by the brooding expectancy which had marked the capital for days past.

Menendez stepped from the ranks of Cabinet members, passed Gomez, and descended two steps. Then he turned and bowed to the Dictator with face as blank as his superior's. When Gomez returned the salutation Menendez wheeled again to face the silent people.

He was one of the most compelling orators in Central America, easily the greatest public speaker of Flores. For this reason, even if his position as senior Cabinet member had not made the choice a matter of form, he was the logical official to deliver this memorial address.

For a long moment his jade-green eyes roved over the upturned faces; he seemed to study the scene in its tiniest detail. Then, with briefness that yet included picture-evoking phrase, Menendez sketched the history of Flores.

He touched upon the era of Spanish dominion, when all Central America, as the Vice-Royalty of Guatemala, was ruled by captains-general from Spain; the union of Central American countries which snapped the fetters of Castile. He spoke of the wild people inhabiting a wilder land; traced the halting progress toward civilization of Francisco Morazan and a few like leaders, who had dragged the people with them. The crowd, swayed by his personal magnetism, listened breathlessly, barely moving.

Steve, lounging in the shelter of a great column of the portico, out of sight both of the Cabinet members and the speakers, acknowledged the strong personality of the Minister. A searching glance at the spectators revealed their yielding to the almost hypnotic spell. Here, Steve fancied idly, lay the secret of Menendez' wide public influence; for almost was Steve himself conscious of willingness to believe anything Menendez might say, to agree with whatever Menendez might propose.

Then a tiny movement, so slight as to be barely noticeable, caught Steve's eye. It came from the packed mass behind the grim infantrymen, but, strain his eyes as he might, Steve could single out

no person moving, though the tremor in the crowd continued. Then, wriggling between two soldiers, who stood gaping upward at Menendez, a man appeared.

He was the ordinary barefooted *peón* to all appearance, in shirt and trousers of coarse and faded cotton. Around his waist was the wide leather belt of many buckles, holding up the inevitable *machete* in leather sheath—the razor-edged weapon, three feet of bright blade-length, common implement of the Central American for purposes ranging from wood-chopping to battle. Except for his pushing to the front there was nothing unusual about the man.

But Steve had posted himself behind the pillar for the sole purpose of watching events. His nerves were in what was, for him, extreme tension. He studied everything, no matter how superficially trivial. He had already assured himself that, whether in obedience to his suggestion or as part of their prearranged program, Estelle and her father sat in a balcony of the State building across the street, from which they could look down upon speaker and audience.

Morales stood in the forefront of a group of staff-officers on the opposite side of the portico,

on Gomez' left. The little Colonel was brilliantly uniformed, but the several sharp glances Steve sent him discovered a palpable nervousness. Morales twiddled with his sword-knot, wriggled his shoulders, moved his feet restlessly.

The barefooted man had moved until he stood barely ten feet distant from the bottom step, but somewhat to the right of it, so that he was sheltered from view of those in the portico's centre by the horses of the President's Guard. Here he had stopped, and stood staring up at Menendez, listening intently with slightly-parted lips, as everyone else in the street was listening. Steve watched the man; watched the crowd behind; watched the statue-like infantrymen. This might be an incident without meaning—no one else seemed to have observed it—but Steve was in the mood to heed anything, however small. For a week he had felt much as if he sat upon a charge of dynamite, with a fuse burning somewhere out of sight. Even now he had no hint of what moved in the keen brain behind Menendez' impassive face.

"That was the old!" Menendez paused amid utter silence. With impressive slowness he raised his hand, the forefinger stabbing out over

their heads. "All about you in our splendid city, everywhere in our smiling land, you may see the symbols of the new order. Troubles have come to you in the past through evil rulers; troubles may come again to Flores, from within or without. But it is no part of our destiny to fail! My faith is in the people of this great republic—that they will never cease to cast down tyrants, to move forward upon the path of progress.

"The black days of blind barbarism, of sluggishness, of inactivity, of tyrannous autocrats holding you as helpless beasts, are gone for ever! Now——"

With the shouted word that motionless figure behind the hussars sprang out and upward like a rowel-stung horse. One jaguar-leap took him half-way up to Menendez, his voice rising shrilly in a weird, hair-raising scream that may have been the war-cry of savage, Mayan ancestors. The *machete* was out, the murderous blade flashing like lambent silver in the yellow sunlight——"

He passed Menendez; halted beside Gomez. The *machete* flickered whistlingly sideway to full arm-length. But before he could swing it back in the deadly side-stroke that would have shorn through the Dictator's neck as through a rotten

banana-stalk, before Gomez could move, before the transfixed throng could draw breath, Steve was behind the man.

One big, vise-like hand clamped crushingly upon the assassin's wrist; bones snapped dully; the *machete* clanged down upon the stone floor. The next instant the man, struggling maniacally in the air above Steve's head, hurtled out above the steps, to crash down at the feet of the Indian soldiers.

Gomez had shot one quick, identifying glance at the man. He sprang forward and snapped his fingers. A dozen *machetes* flashed out in the rank of Indians; rose; fell swiftly; gave instant execution to the sprawling figure. Gomez watched the assassin's end, then sinisterly he looked down at Menendez.

It had all come too swiftly for the crowd to comprehend; the people still stood moveless, gaping upward. But Menendez' heavy features were puttyish in their pallor.

"So you let Umaño from the asylum—to murder me!" Gomez' ringing tones were grim, but Steve fancied they contained a note of satisfaction too. "You are done, Menendez! The firing squad will write period to your dream of power.

Congress will meet to-morrow, and, for all your boasts to Gorman in the mountain inn, in your house, your rogue-friends go empty-handed—as I willed they should.

"You are done, Menendez! I know all your plans—have blocked them all! Ruy Gomez is still master of Flores, Menendez, and you—you are done!'"

Then Menendez whirled to face the terror-stricken Morales, who gaped stupidly, loose mouth working pitfully beneath the tiny waxed moustache.

"*Traidor!*" screamed Menendez furiously, and with the accusation he snatched a pistol from the bosom of his frock-coat. He pulled trigger twice, and a heavy bullet smashed into Morales' sagging mouth.

Again Gomez snapped his fingers, even as Steve waited tensely with both Colts trained upon the Minister. A squad of the fierce-eyed Indians catapulted up the steps and smothered Menendez. He wrestled desperately, so that the compact group surged and heaved. At last he got the pistol-muzzle against his temple, stiffening his thick, squat body against the clutching soldiers as a bear might rise with the dogs hanging to it.

With the muffled report the Minister slumped into the Indians' arms.

Then the mercurial crowd found its voice!

"*Viva* Gomez! *Viva* Gomez!" rose the shouts. Menendez' name was called, also, but coupled with bitter execrations.

Suddenly the cheering halted short; the crowd surged toward the left, slowly at first, then with a rush that cleared the street before the palace of all save the thin line of Indians and the hussars of the Guard. Panic-stricken, with yells of pain as many were trampled underfoot, the people fled. Steve, staring upstreet as the fear-smitten throng had stared, saw soldiers in blue Zouave-dress coming at double-time, the bayonets on their ported rifles twinkling sinisterly in the sunshine. At the same instant Estelle Mays, unaccompanied, emerged from the State building and turned calmly to cross the street.

"*Viva* Menendez the Liberator!" shouted the oncoming troops.

Estelle whirled at the battle-cry and stood as if paralysed in the middle of the Calle Grande, squarely between the onrushing rebels and the Indians of Gomez, who had wheeled at a sharp word of command from an officer to fling them-

selves across the street in company-square and meet the Menendezistas.

With cold fear gripping him, Steve sprang down the steps, hurling to the right and left the soldiers in his way. He was at the girl's side just as the rebels dropped upon one knee to fire. Steve picked up the slender figure—blind to the almost prayerful relief in her eyes at sight of him—and sprinted desperately toward the opposite sidewalk. Luckily, that first volley was as ragged as most bullets of Central American troops; one bullet nicked his hat-brim, but the others no more than splattered the pavement at his heels. He gained the sidewalk unscratched, and dropped his precious burden before the doorway from which she had come.

As her feet touched the tiles Estelle screamed shrilly and tried to push Steve down. Above the rattle of rifle-fire rose the staccato cracking of an automatic pistol; bullets seemed to rain against the wall about them. Steve whirled. With his elbow he shoved the girl inside the open door, jerking both Colts at the same instant. He glimpsed a short, paunchy figure across the street squeezing the trigger of a pistol. The last bullet slapped viciously against the wall; Gorman was

shooting high and right. Then the Irishman dropped as if felled by a club, with Steve's bullet in his shoulder.

The rebel-fire slackened abruptly, amid yells of panic, for Faraday's "hellcats," grinning ferociously, had rushed around the corner from the palace rear. They sprayed bullets from machine-guns upon the rebel flank, while the Indians fired methodically. Those of the Menendezistas—not many—surviving the first impact of that deadly double-fire threw down their weapons and frantically waved their surrender.

Gomez had watched all with grimly-exultant smile. When the handful of rebels had been marched away, ringed about by the "hellcats," the crowd surged back into the Calle Grande. They cheered the big figure on the portico to the echo. Gomez beckoned them nearer, and when again they stood silently, with upturned faces, he looked down upon them indulgently, as a schoolmaster might regard his pupils.

"My people, you have seen the end of a scheming traitor and his silly tools," said Gomez calmly. "So always will Flores reward the unfaithful. Every man who was in Menendez' plot will die. Remember their fate when men whisper to you

that your Government should be overthrown.

"Now it is my command that you continue the celebration. Some men have died this morning; more will die before the night. But I say this has been a good day for Flores!"

They *viva*'d madly, and he nodded acknowledgment, then turned from them to face Steve, who had recrossed the street after the firing's end and climbed the steps. Gomez regarded the big Texan with a smile upon his fierce face. Suddenly he pulled from his finger a great gold ring, in the semblance of a coiled serpent bearing in its mouth a huge emerald. He raised Steve's hand to slip the gem upon a finger, then gripped the hand hard.

"I owe you more than I can ever repay, *General* Lawhorn!" he said in English. "But I should like to lessen the debt as much as I can. Also, there is the matter of the man Gorman's examination. Will you help me with that?"

Chapter XIX

"MAN PROPOSES, BUT——"

A GARBLED, lurid account of the morning's events came to Morg from one of the American's servants as Morg moved restlessly up and down, listening to the clatter of shots from upstreet. He had made perhaps his twentieth trip to the corner to stare nervously toward the Plaza when Steve turned a corner and came quietly down the Avenida. Morg hurried forward and halted Steve in the middle of the block.

"What's all the shootin' about? The room-boy says Menendez' an' Morales was wiped out—what about it? He says the army turned on Gomez an' only a few northern troops held fast—that right?"

Steve grunted unintelligibly. A splinter of stone, knocked from the wall by Gorman's fusillade, had pierced his chest-muscles, and he had lost blood. He was in no mood for talk.

"Well, spill it," prompted Morg, as they turned into the bar-room door.

"Whiskey!" ordered Steve of Antonio, dropping into a chair, then began the deliberate manufacture of a cigarette. Morg eyed him indignantly, then his eyes found the blood-caked shirt just above Steve's heart. With swift indrawing of breath he got up, came around the table, and pulled open the garment with tender fingers. Then he glared accusingly at Steve.

"Oh, it's nothing," Steve reassured him. "Gorman bushwhacked me, and one of his bullets knocked a chip from a wall. Went in about an inch. It's not even bleeding now. I got him through the shoulder. Rotten shooting on both sides. *He* missed eight times. I shot as I turned, so I didn't kill him."

He drained his glass and then leaned back wearily.

"When I saw, this morning, that the sentinels around the Federal buildings were all Indians from the north, that seemed odd—I knew nothing of Gomez' plans—but unimportant. So, after looking over the whole town, I got behind a pillar on the portico.

"You see, we'd been expecting something to pop to-day or to-morrow, but we couldn't figure just what it would be. So we——"

"*We,*" interrupted Morg frowningly. "What d'you mean—*we?*"

"Why, Gomez and I! Surely! I told him everything we'd learned. That was on the day of my argument with 'Chihuahua' Johnson. I drifted down to the palace and sent in my name, and the Dictator had me brought in immediately. He's a *man,* Morg! When I stopped for breath, he nodded.

" 'I knew there was uneasiness in the capital—the country,' he said calmly. 'But my agents have been unable to locate the cause. I knew, too, that Menendez would block my plans if he could, but I had no idea that he'd *dare* to go as far as this!'

"Then he asked me to consider ourselves—you and I—as his personal agents. He remarked that he'd take a few precautions on his own account. He did! It may be that he knew Menendez better than I did, or has a better understanding of the native mind; possibly both. *He* anticipated the armed uprising which occurred, while I looked for only a political rebellion at first—swinging the politicians against Gomez and showing him to be powerless—and then, later, the crash."

Arturo entered the bar-room and crossed to their table.

"The Señor Dwyer," he said apologetically. "I look for him, señores. The man who brings our maize is here for his money."

"Why not tell him to return later?" snapped Steve, and Arturo withdrew.

"Well," Steve went on thoughtfully, "Menendez planned to have only troops from the central and southern departments here for the celebration—troops recruited principally from the estates of Menendez' friends, anti-Gomez men, like himself. We learned to-day that one regiment was in Menendez' pay from Colonel to drummer-boy! The Indians from the north were to be left there, since they are pro-Gomez to a man.

"But Gomez interfered, with some smiling remark about sentiment, with this arrangement. He insisted upon having the Indians from his own section come down. When they got here, Gomez posted them about the Federal buildings. Otherwise he interfered with Menendez' grouping of troops—without arousing Menendez' suspicions, it seems.

"Menendez had sneaked a lunatic named

Umaño from the Federal asylum, promising him a chance to kill the Dictator. Umaño was once a tax-gatherer, and when he went crazy and was locked up he blamed Gomez. Gorman coached Umaño for weeks, and to-day the maniac hopped up the portico-steps at Menendez' signal. I saw him, and when he threatened Gomez, why, I grabbed him. He's dead now; the Indians settled him.

"So Menendez' plan to overthrow the Government and seat himself—legally, too!—in Gomez' chair by the one stroke of Gomez' murder went blooey! Good scheme, though; as senior Cabinet member Menendez automatically would have been president *pro tem.* The army would back him up, except for the northern troops, and with arsenal and Government machinery in his hands, what had he to fear?

"He intended, so Gorman confessed—we just third-degreed Gorman at the palace—to shoot down Umaño the minute Gomez was killed, thereby removing any suspicion of complicity in the murder.

"Menendez thought Morales was the traitor, so he shot him, then committed suicide to beat the firing-squad. So"—Steve stretched luxuri-

ously—"everything's over except the trial of the other conspirators. They'll be dead by morning. Gomez is still master; more so than ever, with Menendez dead.

"How's the arm and constitution generally, old-timer?"

"Fair. Two-three days an' I'll be *maskee*. Think I'll stroll down town this evenin'. Say, it'll seem funny not to need a couple holsterfuls o' hardware, huh?"

"Reckon the town's about ours," Steve nodded. "Gomez is generous to those he likes. He made me a 'Perpetual General'—whatever that may be—in the army, and you're the same breed of Colonel—honours to exist until our death. Then he gave me this"—the great emerald gleamed duskily upon his raised hand—"and offered us anything we wanted—Government timberlands, ranches, this place——"

"This place? Why, what's happened to Dwyer? Was *he* in the scheme?"

"He was! He's on his way to San Pedro now, with a fine, large military escort. Deported. He'll be under guard clear to New Orleans. You see"—Steve's eyes twinkled—"his real name happens to be Leo Gorman! Yep! I knew it

all the time, but I feared your innocent face'd publish the news to him if I told you. I found out that night I had my ear glued to Menendez' window.

"Remember the white scar in Dwyer's palm? Well, that night, when Gorman was begging Menendez not to turn him over to the authorities, he threw up his hand, and I saw the scar. *Then* I had him where the hair was short! Gorman, with a good scrubbing, clean linen, and minus black moustache and wig, made Dwyer the hotelman. Remember how he was always disappearing—'on business'?

"I wondered just where Gorman could be so popular as Menendez had intimated, so I thought of sending a radiogram to New Orleans and asking the police-chief there if he had Gorman's record. You made your famous ride to 'Pedro and —Gorman was fixed. Gomez made out the deportation-order a week ago, leaving the date blank. It was executed to-day."

"You old *Nick Carter!* But what'd you tell Gomez—about takin' up his offers?"

"Oh, I said we planned to head south to Argentina. Couldn't think of accepting rewards. I—I

don't fancy this country, Morg. Argentina'll suit us. Sure it will!"

"Oh, she's good enough." Morg was eyeing his partner narrowly. "But why the big rush? Is it—the li'l lady, *amigo mío?* Estelle?"

"Certainly not! But we're finished here. After Menendez had issued his bale of warnings I wouldn't hike. Too, until—well, lately, I thought we'd work for Mays. But—not now. I —I'm restless as the Wandering Jew."

"*Bueno!* We'll hike whenever you say. But, right now, this excitement's done horrible things to my appetite. She's all swelled up like a toy balloon. Let's go get it!"

In mid-afternoon Steve went upstairs. When he came down an hour later he was bathed and shaved and wearing the grey suit that seemed to bring him adventures whenever he donned it. But he was less talkative, if possible, then he had been before. Tiring finally of grunts and monosyllables, Morg withdrew to a table behind Steve and occupied himself with solitaire.

They went in to *comida* at dusk. Morg chattered volubly throughout the meal, without en-

couragement of any sort. Afterward, Steve dug up an ancient magazine and settled beneath a light in the corner of the bar-room. Morg renewed his solitaire for a time, but finally rose and yawned with elaborate attention to detail.

"Sure is sleepy weather," he drawled, then sauntered toward the patio door.

Steve made no reply, keeping his eyes upon the page. Morg halted just outside the doorway, cocking an ear toward Steve for a moment. Then he went noiselessly through the patio into the hotel office and so out to the street. He crossed it swiftly and moved toward the brighter lights about the Plaza, grinning pleasantly to himself.

After Morg's departure the room seemed unbearably dull. For an hour Steve tried to read, but at last tossed the magazine into a far corner with highly uncomplimentary comment, and clapped his hands. Antonio hastened over with a bottle of Black-and-White.

"Who told you I wanted Scotch?" Steve growled.

Antonio shrugged placatingly. It was not for him to criticize the inconsistencies of *diablos Americanos*. Besides, this one was a most dan-

gerous man when aroused. So Antonio smiled inoffensively.

"In the evenings it has always been the Scotch, señor. Do you now desire the something different?"

"No, leave it."

Steve gulped a thimbleful and made a horrible face.

"Hell's doorbells! Speaking of furniture-polish, badly scorched!"

He refilled his glass, but the second drink was even worse; he barely wet his lips, and set down the glass. He felt a nauseating disgust for everything about him, for all that his life touched. Well, he shrugged, perhaps it would be better upon the trail. But immediately his heart branded him a liar. It would be worse, with every step taking him farther from the place where he had dreamed pleasant, if silly, dreams; farther from a violet-eyed girl——

Grimly he clamped his jaws together and stood up. His saddlebags were topsy-turvy, and it would never do to start a long journey with the *alforjas* looking like—"Hell on a Monday morning," he finished sourly. Then he sat down again. He shrank from facing Morg, who would

be bubbling over with humorous questions and remarks.

But still, however dolefully he sighed at the prospect, those *alforjas* needed repacking. Steve was an orderly soul, and habit is an inconveniently sharp spur. He got up and slouched dejectedly out and up the stairs to the balcony. A light shone above the door of No. 15, and Steve halted for an instant while he assumed an expression utterly carefree. Then he opened the door upon an empty room.

He had rather dreaded Morg's cheerfulness, but now he felt vaguely hurt. Everyone deserted him these days—Faraday, even Morg. His partner was probably in one of the cafés by now; sitting with a drink before him, watching some slim native girl whirl through a mad dance.

Savagely Steve jerked the big saddlebags from beneath his cot, then squatted upon his heels to regard them frowningly. There was a vague oddity about them. He picked them up, then he knew. They were marvellously light! He held them upside down, and out dropped a single rose from each—splendid blood-red flowers. At these he gaped, then laid them upon the cot and stood up. He crossed to Morg's cot and drew out

Morg's *alforjas*. Opened, they displayed their usual contents.

"Plague take that animal!" Steve growled to the world. "He's just about convalescent, *I'd* tell the neighbours!"

In the wall-closet his belongings made a tumbled heap. Steve rescued an armful. "The blame' Comanche! Everything I own every which way for Sunday!"

Then the roses caught his eye again. He picked one up, and there came to him flashing recollection of a morning in the Mays' patio, when Estelle, in habit and breeches and little tan boots, had come out to him sparkling-eyed and fresh as the dawn. She had worn such a rose as this.

Steve sat down upon the window-ledge and stared out through the window-bars into the star-studded vault overhead. Such a black wave of despondence as he had never known swept him. He rested his forehead against the bars and closed his eyes.

The gentle creaking of the door came to him. Morg, coming in silently, thought Steve, to see the result of his horse-play. Steve did not intend to display his inner feelings. Slowly he raised his head and turned, then stared unbelievingly.

Leaning upon the door-facing was the girl whose image had been in his thoughts. There was nothing in her face except polite interest; the violet eyes were as softly void of all expression as twin pools of sea-water—even when they wandered to the rose in his hand.

"You seem to be packing," she said reflectively, while Steve still stared, dumb with utterest astonishment. Now, how had she come to stand in that door—in the American at all?

"May I ask your destination, Mr.——I mean *General* Lawhorn?" The inquiry was courteous, but no more. No, certainly no more.

"Argentina."

"But why Argentina? Once you told me it was to the States that you wanted to go; to—Texas, wasn't it?"

"Odd that you remember that," he told her dryly, "considering that you forgot everything else I said. Or so you wrote."

"Oh, but I didn't *forget!* Not at all. I wrote that I didn't *believe.*"

"Amounted to the same—as it happened."

"But why leave Flores? I understand that President Gomez has made you a General, has offered you a ranch, with stock and everything you

could possibly want. I should think that you'd prefer to start for yourself rather than work for someone else."

"I have never done anything in the hope of reward."

"No?" The violet eyes opened wide, one dark brow curving interrogatively in a way Steve remembered vividly. "Why, didn't you oppose Menendez and save the President's life *and* his position for—because you expected reward? No? Then why *did* you do it? Why did you mix in this conspiracy at all, keep Menendez from winning—as the President says you did single-handed? I'm really curious about you! I'm anxious to know why you risked your life day and night, worked like a story-book detective, even—even made love to—to girls to learn what they knew. I hear you had dozens of narrow escapes. Why did you set your heart on defeating Menendez if not for reward? It wasn't for Gomez' sake? Sure?"

"Oh, of course not! Certainly not!" Steve snapped irritably.

"Then it was because—because you're just—just naturally meddlesome?"

"Oh, perhaps!" Steve began stacking clothing

and cartridges in two neat piles on his cot, his manner proclaiming to all who might watch, his complete engrossment in the task.

"No, it wasn't! *I* know why you blocked Menendez; why you notified the San Francisco authorities about the man Gorman; why you remained in Apacaz at hourly risk of your very life! You did it for—because—anyway, I know! And now—you're going to Argentina?"

"Day or two. Soon as Morg can ride." But this time Steve could not keep the dreariness from his voice. Why had she come here to tantalise him with sight of her? It had been hard enough before, but now—now, it was plain hell!

"Why not—Texas?"

Steve turned upon her sharply. From the bosom of her dress came a folded yellow paper, to Steve's eyes much like a cablegram. She held it out, and after momentary hesitation he stretched a long arm to take it. It *was* a cablegram, addressed to Howard Mays. Steve saw the superscription, then automatically he read the signature: "Benjamin Allison, Sheriff, Saylor County, Texas, U.S.A."

The blood ebbed from Steve's tanned cheeks as he read the message:

"If you know whereabouts Stephen Lawhorn please inform him all charges against him cancelled. Saylor County has new administration all white men. Ramon Guerra died suddenly of lead poisoning. Oil discovered all over *Circle Diamond* Ranch. Can sell for half million or more. Please make Steve return immediately."

Estelle watched him, twin spots of bright colour in her cheeks. Steve was staring out between the window-bars with gaze that reached far and far away—clear to the yellow-white reaches of Texan prairies——

"I can go back! Not to dodge and sneak again —ever. A half-million for my stack of chips. Morg will be glad, Miss Mays; mighty glad. He's been homesick for years, but wouldn't admit it—the Comanche!"

"But you? Aren't *you* pleased—a little even? Why, I thought you'd be delighted, so I brought the message myself. It's a week old, but dad just received it—more of Menendez' scheming, I suppose, behind the delay. Dad cabled Saylor City when I—tried to help you."

"Thanks awfully. I—I'm delighted, of course; I'll go back, all right—I guess."

She stared in genuine bewilderment now. Then a slow smile curved the scarlet lips. With

little Chinese steps she scurried across the room and perched herself on Morg's cot with a flash of blue, silk-sheathed ankles.

"Tell me, St—General Lawhorn," she said, the voice wheedlingly soft and very, very humble, "were you ever—in love?"

Steve regarded her grimly. No longer did she remind him of a slim boy. She was rather like a little, little girl as she sat cross-legged upon the cot, dark head lowered, violet eyes intent upon her shining nails.

"I was!" he said slowly, then sat down with compressed lips. "Like to hear the sad tale? I don't in the least mind telling!"

She shrank back as if she had been struck before the bitterness of his voice.

"I was—just about what I am now, except that there was a price on my head. *She* told me she believed that I'd been rather banged about; that I'd been pushed into most of the things I'd done awry; that she considered me, despite the world's opinion, not wholly outside the pale.

"Then I played the fool while trying to be a detective, and a native girl put her arms around my neck—just in time for me to be seen, of course. Next I cuffed a treacherous little braggart. *So*

I was informed that I'd been judged again; this time found to be what the world proclaimed me—a killer, a ruffian decent folk couldn't tolerate. That's all!"

"Are you—sure?"

"Sure! I've had time to think. When I got your note it seemed at first that the universe had toppled upon me. But I had half-expected it, too. So those few days I was permitted were—*are*—the most precious things I've ever had. But even while I had them I knew they couldn't last. If life had been different——"

Thought of Tommy Harrison came like a knife-stab.

"I suppose I should congratulate little Harrison?" he said quietly. "And you also? He'll make a good man, one day. He—he hasn't a past, and so he's luckier than he knows—luckier than he'll ever know."

"I expect him to make a good husband," nodded Estelle gravely. "When Tommy marries I'll be very sure to congratulate the bride."

Steve stared blindly at her, stared so long and with such revealment in his eyes of the dumb pleading in his heart that she could bear it no more than an instant. She darted across to him

and dropped upon her knees at his feet. His hands were covered by soft, warm little palms as he looked dazedly down at the humble, dusky head.

"Steve! Steve!" she breathed. "You dear, blind, *blessed* man! I was madly jealous of her —Carlotta. So I *said* I didn't believe. I—I wanted to hurt you as much as sight of her, close to you, had hurt me. Morg told me everything to-night. The President had told us much before. I—oh, I'm bold and brazen, but I don't seem to care. Happiness is too all-important to let it slip. Steve!"—the voice was muffled, because her face was covered now by her hands—"are you going to make me do *all* the love-making?"

The tremendous upheaval of neatly-piled clothing carried all to the floor. Moments passed, then Estelle raised her flushed face from his shoulder and smiled at him, tenderly, and yet within her eyes that sex-old wonderment of woman, considering the mysterious forces which have, all unseen, wrought her great moment.

"*Dear* Apacaz!" she said. "I'll always love it. Think, Steve! Six months ago you stood way down there in the south, while I was in the States. Neither of us was thinking of coming

here. Then we moved, and our feet fell into the road to to-night!"

Steve's mind seemed to click, and up sprang the picture of the big Indian packer he had met upon a hilltop—the *cargadore* from Menendez' estate of Matagordo. He smiled, too, with wonderment.

"'In Flores we have a saying that *all* trails lead to Apacaz,'" he quoted, and drew her close against him.

The door creaked. Morg's beaming face—trained rigidly upon a distant corner of the room—was framed in the aperture.

"Say, Steve," he drawled, "I know that chap'rons are s'posed to be patient an' long-sufferin' an' all that; I don't aim to rush you none. But Mr. Mays is busy packin' *their* stuff so's to get it off to San Pedro to-night, an' he needs Miss Estelle's help, he says. Furthermore an' also, he says that if we—meanin' you an' me—want to make the next steamer for Galveston with him an' Miss Estelle, *we* better be a-packin'. Think it over, will you?"

The door closed, and Morg's footsteps sounded, *diminuendo*. Presently, from the other end of the balcony, the railing creaked beneath his

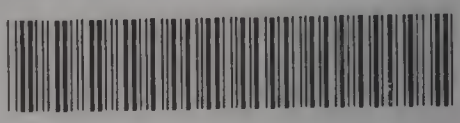
weight. His voice rose plaintively. He was singing, putting to that ancient melody, "I Want to be in Kansas when the Sunflowers Bloom," new words, very evidently improvised for the occasion:

Oh! I want to be in Texas when the oil-wells spout!

TRAIL'S END

SEP 22 1924

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



00022191998